

LABOR AND THE NEW DEAL: THE CASE  
OF THE LOS ANGELES ILGWU

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OF THE LOS ANGELES ILGWU

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## PREFACE

This project examines the experience of a single labor union, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), in Los Angeles during the New Deal era. Comparisons are drawn between local and national developments within the ILGWU and the American labor movement in general. Surprisingly little effort has been made to test prevailing historical interpretations within specific cities-- especially those lying outside of the industrial northeast. Until more localized research is undertaken, the unique organizational struggles of thousands of working men and women will remain ill-understood. Differences in regional politics, economics, ethnicity, and leadership defy the application of broad-based generalizations.

The Los Angeles ILGWU offers an excellent example of a group that did not conform to national trends. While the labor movement experienced remarkable success throughout much of the United States, the Los Angeles garment locals failed to achieve their basic goals. Although eastern clothing workers won every important dispute with owners and bargained from a position of strength, their disunited southern Californian counterparts languished under the counterattacks of business interests. No significant gains in ILGWU membership occurred in Los Angeles after 1933, and the open shop survived well

into the following decade. A powerful minority of cloak and dress manufacturers and a majority of sportswear producers never signed a labor contract. Many firms that recognized the union broke the terms of their agreements when it became clear that they could do so with near impunity. Wages and working conditions received modest improvement despite a series of violent strikes that created a tragic spectacle for Los Angeles residents. Overshadowed by other concerns, such as presidential campaigns, economic crises, and the growth of fascism abroad, these confrontations went almost unnoticed outside the state of California.

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## CHAPTER I

### LABOR ISSUES AND THE NEW DEAL

Historians have long focussed upon the New Deal era as a critical turning point in the development of organized labor. Over the course of five decades, scholars have concentrated on an array of controversial topics that provide the substance for considerable interpretational quarreling. For the purpose of this study, the writer has selected a number of major issues that relate to the specific case to be investigated: The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) in Los Angeles. The following pages will survey federal legislation, the reaction of management to unionization, the political left, the rivalry between the AFL and the CIO, and the United States labor movement in general. This essay and the following chapter about the ILGWU at the national level will provide a historical background with which conditions in the Los Angeles garment district may be compared. Although the union experience of the Ladies' Garment Workers in Los Angeles was in many respects characteristic of that witnessed nationally, evidence indicates that they failed to fully join in the overall success enjoyed by the larger labor movement. The reasons for this failure were numerous, but the strength of resisting anti-labor forces and the weaknesses of the local

ILGWU leadership may be isolated as crucial ones.

In the years after World War One the unionization movement suffered a steady decline, first during the postwar economic boom and then under the Great Depression. Between 1929 and 1933, membership dropped from 3.6 to 2.9 million, a decline made more damaging by the fact that thousands of registered workers no longer paid their dues.<sup>1</sup> The legislation sponsored by New Dealers, more than any other single factor, changed the fortunes of the union movement and allowed it to grow to new heights of power and prestige.

After occupying the oval office for only three months, Franklin Roosevelt signed into law the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) as part of his effort to revive the collapsed economy. The president hoped to initiate cooperation between labor and business through collective bargaining, thus restoring the nation's prosperity. Roosevelt requested that employers in each branch of industry draft codes of fair competition that would end destructive fighting between owners and address the grievances of laborers. Section 7(a) of the law included three provisions: First, that employees had the right to select their own representatives free of employer intimidation; second, that no employee could be forced to join a company union; and third, that employers must comply with the president's minimum wage and maximum hour rates, and any other conditions approved by the executive.<sup>2</sup>



The vague wording of the labor clause resulted in immediate disputes over its precise meaning. Labor leaders viewed section 7(a) as their "Magna Charta," granting the unions legal legitimacy and outlawing the open shop. When business representatives across the country asserted their own interpretations that protected the status quo, the result was ironic but predictable. Strikes, part of the very industrial "aggression" that FDR had hoped to eliminate, erupted nationwide.<sup>3</sup> The National Labor Board created by the NIRA floundered under the resulting avalanche of cases and lacked the power to take effective action.<sup>4</sup> The Recovery Act granted the Board no authority to impose criminal penalties, so that manufacturers felt free to defy the spirit of the law. The Roosevelt administration felt relief when in May, 1935 the Supreme Court ruled the NIRA unconstitutional in the Schechter decision, clearing the way for an improved labor code.<sup>5</sup>

The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) or Wagner Act, the "most radical labor legislation ever enacted" according to its opponents, was signed into law on July 5, 1935. Drafted by Senator Robert Wagner of New York to prevent the "unfair labor practices" that existed under the flawed NIRA, the bill was initially opposed by FDR. Soon after the Senate passed the Wagner Act, however, the president changed his mind and gave his support-- with the votes of industrial workers in mind. In clear language the new law recognized the right of laborers to bargain collectively, to speak freely in

advocating unionism, to elect representatives without harassment or coercion, and to protest unfair practices by employers and seek compensation.<sup>6</sup> Although it was not until 1937 that the Supreme Court upheld the Act, the ultimate effectiveness of the NLRA was considerable. During its first ten years of operation, a reconstructed National Labor Relations Board tried over 70,000 cases involving "unfair labor practices" and labor representation. The Board monitored some 24,000 elections, allowed 300,000 workers to return to work after illegal dismissal, and awarded millions of dollars in back pay.<sup>7</sup>

The Wagner Act was the culmination of several decades of legislative effort and included modifications first pioneered in a number of lesser prototypes. Congress strengthened its labor initiative by adding the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938), which broadened limitations on child labor and assigned new minimum wage and maximum hour rates.<sup>8</sup> From the start, manufacturers recognized and resented the threat posed by New Deal labor laws, and resisted unionization by various means throughout the New Deal era.

Manufacturers often reacted to labor legislation by simply ignoring it and then using every legal challenge or appeal at their disposal if workers filed a complaint. Labor itself had criticized the NRA, calling it the "National Run Around" because of the system's inefficiency. By 1935 almost everyone regarded the act as a failure and businessmen

resisted even mild attempts to enforce its provisions. Few of the NRA codes ever submitted by business groups met government standards, demonstrating that often even cooperative capitalists would yield to administration policies only in part.<sup>9</sup> During the first two years after the passage of the Wagner Act-- and longer in some cases-- employers violated the new law openly, assuming that it too would be overturned in the courts. The Guffey-Snyder Act, an attempt to restore articles of the NRA over the coal industry, fell before the Supreme Court in late 1935, strengthening manufacturers' resolve to resist labor legislation. But the High Court upheld the NLRA after the La Follette Committee's disclosures of anti-labor conspiracies and Roosevelt's "court packing" attempt, resulting in a sobering awakening for business. Rapidly, with an efficient National Labor Relations Board, open disobedience became an unviable option.<sup>10</sup>

Another common method of combating labor organization was the creation of company unions under the control of business management. Although both section 7(a) and the Wagner Act that replaced it called for an end to employer interference in collective bargaining, hundreds of major companies founded or reactivated "representation plans." Between 1933 and 1935, company unions actually grew faster than trade unions and enrolled about 2.5 million workers. It was not until 1940 that the company union movement fell into decline-- largely as a result of the disclosures of "employer interferences" made

by Senator Robert La Follette's investigating subcommittee.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the company union, businesses utilized other traditional weapons against militant working men and women. Employers united in newly formed manufacturers' associations to coordinate strategies for preserving the open shop-- both legal and illegal.<sup>12</sup> The circulation of blacklists prevented the hiring of known troublemakers, and whitelists provided the names of "reliable" prospective employees. Businessmen also used their privilege to discharge laborers "for any or no reason" to weed out known union members and to intimidate others who might be thinking of joining. As property owners, businessmen claimed the right to padlock shops and factories for any reason, using such lockouts to starve resisting employees into submission.<sup>13</sup>

Besides and often in conjunction with the methods already mentioned was the use of violence to protect company property and to "maintain law and order." Munitions makers made a fortune by catering to nervous employers, and in 1935 one said that he hoped " a hell of a strike would get under way." In 1937, Republic Steel owned "552 revolvers, 64 rifles, 245 shotguns, 145 gas guns, 4,033 gas projectiles, 2,707 gas grenades, and an undetermined number of night sticks and gas revolvers."<sup>14</sup> Employees resented these private arsenals and the armies of strikebreakers and guards that accompanied them, and their increased anger made strikes likelier. At San Francisco shipyards, Chicago steel plants, North Carolina

textile mills, and elsewhere, hired policemen gunned down scores of strikers and clubbed and gassed hundreds of others. When the La Follette Committee questioned business representatives about the use of lethal force, the most frequent justification they gave was the need to counteract the activities of Communists and other subversive elements.<sup>15</sup>

The task of analyzing the role of the left in organized labor is made difficult by the varying usages of the term "left." An essay jointly written by two historians included the following list of radical groups active in unionization drives during FDR's presidency: "Communists, Socialists, Trotskyites, members of the Proletarian party and the Revolutionary Workers' League, New America supporters, Lovestoneites... old time 'wobblies' and Socialist Labor party members and syndicalists...."<sup>16</sup> Other writers have included New Deal Democrats and liberals of various stripes in an even broader definition. Many seem to believe that all those who advocated labor unions belonged to an amorphous leftist camp. This discussion will emphasize the Communists, because they were the most influential group and have received the most attention by historians. As later chapters will reveal, the Communists (and to a less clear extent, the Socialists) played an important role in the attempt to organize the Los Angeles garment industry.<sup>17</sup>

Prior to 1935, the largest radical labor organization in the United States was the Communists' Trade Union Unity League

(TUUL) with 125,000 members. Included in the TUUL was the Needle Trades Union, which competed with the ILGWU and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union for the support of garment workers in every major center of clothing manufacture. During this period of dual unionist policy, the TUUL and its affiliates sought to disrupt and discredit the American Federation of Labor (AFL), thus wresting control of the labor movement from the "social fascists."<sup>18</sup> After 1935 the Communists dissolved the TUUL and sought to "bore from within," hoping to gain control of the AFL and the emerging Congress (initially "Committee") of Industrial Organizations (CIO) by infiltrating the rank and file and then assuming leadership positions.<sup>19</sup>

There has been considerable disagreement over the strength of Communist power in the union movement, especially within the CIO, during the New Deal. One contemporary writer flatly denied reports of a strong Communist presence within Lewis's organization, stating that "Communist influence within the CIO is a figment of imagination."<sup>20</sup> At the same time another labor expert declared that "Stalinism is a danger in the CIO," and hinted that the reds might possess the real leadership while hiding behind figureheads.<sup>21</sup> Still another writer asserted that John L. Lewis maintained strong control of the CIO and merely used the Communists for their organizing skills-- which appears to be the consensus view.<sup>22</sup> When taken to task by David Dubinsky of the ILGWU for his use of

Communists, Lewis is said to have remarked, "Who gets the bird, the hunter or the dog?"<sup>23</sup>

The contention that the Communists concentrated their main efforts upon the CIO and left the AFL in relative peace has been periodically challenged. Although CP members never penetrated the Federation's national leadership, the Communists enjoyed considerable success in controlling isolated union locals.<sup>24</sup> They achieved a substantial degree of authority among AFL machinists, printers, and needleworkers, because traditional socialist ideologies remained strong within those groups. In all of these cases the Communists served as tenuous leaders of coalitions, usually maintaining a low political profile.<sup>25</sup>

Historical assessments of the success of Communist participation in the labor movement depend as much upon the writer's own political views as anything else. Often, critical scholars attribute the party's victories to its dishonorable, covert strategy, and consider the Communists failures because mastery of the labor movement eluded them.<sup>26</sup> CP obedience to the orders of the Soviet Comintern, which caused it to radically reverse major policy positions involving politics and labor strategy, is cited as proof that the organization was un-American. In addition, opponents have used the immigrant origins of a large percentage of CP members to label them as creators of a foreign political movement in the United States.<sup>27</sup> Other sources praise the Communists for

the invaluable role they played in organizing workers and view their internationalist convictions as a strength instead of a weakness. New Left historians praise the party for its stand in favor of racial equality, but sometimes criticize its "sacrifice [of a] consistent approach of building socialism in this country in order to support policies determined in Russia."<sup>28</sup> Regardless of how the efforts of Communist labor organizers are judged, it is usually conceded that the Communists formed the most effective radical labor group. They successfully gained a foothold in hundreds of labor organizations, where they exercised varying degrees of influence. Even within the ILGWU, led by the renowned red-hater Dubinsky, individual Communists won positions of responsibility during the Depression years-- but usually at the price of concealing their political convictions.<sup>29</sup>

Before leaving the subject of the left, it would be remiss not to mention the union activities of the Socialists. The most remarkable aspect of the Socialist party's effort to build support within the labor movement was its complete failure. At the advent of the New Deal era the Socialist party enjoyed its greatest strength within the needle trades and hoped to restore the allegiance of the machinists, brewers, shoemakers, and mine workers who had followed Eugene V. Debs in years past. Allied with the Jewish Daily Forward, David Dubinsky, Sidney Hillman, and other Socialist labor leaders sponsored a Congress of Workers and Farmers in order



to exploit the growing discontent among laborers. The result was a fiasco, and the Socialist support within the needle trades shifted gradually to FDR. Dubinsky himself allowed his party affiliation to lapse and became a staunch New Deal advocate. Other old-time Socialists remained active within the labor movement, but did so as individuals instead of as party representatives.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the issue of the left, the rivalry between William Green's AFL and John Lewis's CIO remains one of the most discussed and debated dramas in American labor history. The rift that emerged affected the growth and direction of organized labor in profound ways, with both positive and negative results. As one of the new giants of industrial unionism, the ILGWU became directly involved in the fraternal quarrel that grew into a lengthy civil war.

The dispute began in 1934, when a large minority faction within the AFL began advocating a change in union organization. The previous year had brought dramatic increases in membership and a renewed spirit of militancy among workers who interpreted section 7(a) of the NIRA as a call to action. John L. Lewis, AFL vice-president and head of the United Mine Workers (UMW), also sensed that a great opportunity was at hand and demanded a major recruiting effort on the part of the AFL. Lewis, Dubinsky, and other leaders called for industrial unionism that would organize the great multitudes of unskilled laborers whose jobs were products of

twentieth century mechanization. For fifty-five years the AFL had organized skilled craftsmen, and Federation elders resisted admitting groups that they considered inferior. This included millions of unskilled workers in mass-production industries like steel, lumber, automobiles, and rubber. After a year of sluggish action by Green, Lewis made deliberate moves to cause a schism at the AFL convention of 1935.<sup>31</sup>

At the convention's opening, Lewis and his allies tendered a resolution calling for an immediate change to industrial unionism, and the UMW chief delivered an impassioned speech on its behalf. Lewis concluded with the ringing words: "... heed this cry from Macedonia that comes from the hearts of men. Organize the unorganized!" The convention delegates responded by promptly voting the measure down by a wide margin, to the glee of AFL conservatives. After punching Carpenters' Union boss William Hutcheson in the mouth during a heated debate, Lewis retired to form his Committee for Industrial Organization and to prepare for battle.<sup>32</sup>

Events then moved toward nationwide conflict. The CIO began issuing charters to steel, auto, and rubber workers, causing Green to demand its dissolution and an end to unauthorized dual unionism. Lewis and his associates ignored the order and in August, 1936, the AFL's Executive Council ejected the ten CIO unions from their parent organization.<sup>33</sup> Dubinsky's ILGWU became an important component within the CIO

until 1938, when Lewis announced the creation of a "permanent national organization," formalizing the rift in the labor movement. Strongly believing in a united cause, Dubinsky returned to the AFL and helped swing the balance of power in the Federation's favor.<sup>34</sup> The AFL won clear numerical superiority over the CIO and by 1941 some sources estimated that it was twice as large. The retirement of Lewis and the gradual realization of AFL dominance ultimately led to unification.<sup>35</sup>

Hostility between the AFL and the CIO continued throughout the New Deal era producing mixed results. The most positive aspect of the rivalry was the great expansion in union membership. The CIO staged monumental sit-down strikes in which workers physically occupied factories to prevent the use of scab labor. Although this tactic was illegal, it forced many owners, especially in the auto and steel industries, to accept the closed shop. Pressured by the huge successes of the CIO, AFL leaders began their own recruiting campaign. One branch of the AFL, the Teamsters, rose in membership from 95,500 to 350,000, and other affiliates enjoyed similar gains.<sup>36</sup> Less beneficial was the great loss of energy that both sides expended in attacking each other and in competing for the same recruits. Enemies of the labor movement capitalized on the public squabbling of the period and succeeded in gradually swaying considerable public opinion against the unions. This contributed to the anti-labor

backlash during the 1940's and 1950's.<sup>37</sup>

Overwhelmingly, historians agree that the New Deal era represented a period of growth and prosperity for organized labor. Union membership nearly tripled, climbing from roughly three million to nine million by 1941.<sup>38</sup> Thousands of blacks shared in the revitalized movement, which more than doubled the number of organized transportation, factory, and mine workers.<sup>39</sup> Union treasuries swelled, allowing leaders to formulate elaborate social programs and contribute extravagant sums to charities and political campaigns. Collective bargaining forced employers to listen to the complaints of employees and led to improved working conditions and wage levels. Ultimately, cooperation between business and labor reduced industrial conflict to the benefit of postwar society. Organized labor became a political force and emerged as a powerful element in the new Democratic coalition.<sup>40</sup> At the root of all these developments was powerful federal legislation that legitimized unions, set standards for wages and hours, and purged the working place of many evils as old as industrialization itself. At the same time, changes came slowly to many communities that lay removed from the industrial centers of the north.

## Notes

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- 3 Sidney Lens. The Labor Wars: From the Molly Maguires to the Sitdowns (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1973), 336.
- 4 MacDonald, Labor Problems, 757.
- 5 Carroll R. Daugherty. Labor Problems in American Industry (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941), 933.
- 6 James R. Green. The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth Century America (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 150.
- 7 Lens, The Labor Wars, 337.
- 8 Jerold S. Auerbach. American Labor: The Twentieth Century (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969), 379.
- 9 Joseph G. Rayback. A History of American Labor (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 330-32.
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- 12 Harry A. Millis and Emily Clark Brown. From the Wagner Act to Taft Hartley: A Study of National Labor Policy and Labor Relations (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1950), 95.
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- 15 Ibid., 104-05.
- 16 Bernard Karsh and Phillips L. Garman in Labor and the

New Deal by Milton Derber and Edwin Young eds. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), 98.

17 David J. Saposs. Communism in American Unions (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 148.

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19 Ibid., 102.

20 Edwin Levinson. Labor on the March (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938), 282.

21 Benjamin Stolberg quoted in The Communist Party and the Auto Workers' Unions by Roger Keeran (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 2.

22 Herbert Harris. Labor's Civil War (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 143-44.

23 Karsh and Garman in Labor and the New Deal by Derber and Young eds., 104.

24 Saposs, Communism in American Unions, ix.

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26 Saposs, Communism in American Unions, viii.

27 Sidney Lens. The Crisis of American Labor (New York: Sagamore Press, 1959), 134-35.

28 Green, The World of the Worker in Twentieth Century America, 164.

29 Irving Bernstein. Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 82.

30 Ibid., 779-80.

31 Henry Pelling. American Labor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 164.

32 Saul Alinsky. John L. Lewis: An Unauthorized Biography (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1949), 75-76.

33 Rayback, A History of American Labor, 350.

- 34 Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 709.
- 35 Ibid., 773-74.
- 36 Pelling, American Labor, 170-71.
- 37 Sanford Cohen. Labor in the United States (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1970), 83-84.
- 38 Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 778.
- 39 Green, The World of the Worker, 172-73.
- 40 Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 778.

## CHAPTER II

## THE ILGWU DURING THE NEW DEAL

In order to gain an understanding of the emergence of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) as one of the giants of organized labor, it is necessary to explore two historical avenues. One must traverse three stormy decades of struggle (1900-1930) that concluded with a bankrupt union facing destruction. The formative experiences of the man who then rebuilt it are also of critical importance. Educated in the ruthless garment industry of New York's Lower East Side, David Dubinsky used his intimate knowledge of the needle trades and an innate determination, intellect, and charisma to conquer what appeared to be impossible odds. As the union's new president in 1932, Dubinsky arrived to find disconnected telephones, frozen elevators, and a \$750,000 debt.<sup>1</sup> Exploiting the opportunities offered by New Deal legislation and growing worker discontent, this stocky little immigrant revived and transformed the ILGWU and became the world renowned leader of an influential institution.

The scandalous working conditions that prompted the creation of the ILGWU and its sister organizations were already acute some twenty years before the future union president reached American shores. In 1890 Jacob A. Riis



wrote the following description of New York's garment district:

Take the Second Avenue Elevated Railroad at Chatham Square and ride up half a mile through the sweaters' district. Every open window of the big tenements, that stand like a continuous brick wall on both sides of the way, gives you a glimpse of these shops as the train speeds by. Men and women bend over the machines, or ironing clothes at the window, half-naked.... The road is like a big gangway through an endless work-room where vast multitudes are forever laboring. Morning, noon, or night, it makes no difference; the scene is always the same.<sup>2</sup>

Working hours were often unlimited in the worst garment shops, and laborers operated their machines until exhaustion overtook them. During the busy season men sometimes worked all night, and the streets of New York filled at four a.m. with clothing workers on their way to the factories. Forced to buy their own sewing machines and thread, employees paid the owners for the electricity to run them and were subject to fines for a variety of minor infractions. A serious offense, such as arriving to work late, might result in termination or the loss of three hours' pay. Protest was to no avail, because owners found an endless supply of labor at the "Pig Market"-- the informal labor exchange around Essex and Hester Streets. A worker knew his boss had fired him if he arrived for work one morning and found his machine sitting near the door.<sup>3</sup>

By the turn of the century, Italians and Jews of the "new immigration" dominated the garment trades, having replaced earlier established groups because of their willingness to

accept lower wages. Of the two groups, it was predictably the Jews who took the lead in the task of organizing for reform. Hailing from eastern Europe, many Jews possessed political education and union experience gained from membership in underground organizations such as the General Jewish Workers Union, Labor Zion, and the Socialist Bund. As a result of the danger of arrest and the lack of basic civil rights in Russia and Poland, many young radicals numbered among the 100,000 Jews who migrated to the United States each year.

Disenchanted with the exploitation and squalor they found in the New World, many former subjects of the Tsar became members of the newborn ILGWU in 1900 and the years that followed.<sup>4</sup>

During the first eight years of its existence, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union fought merely to survive. The concerted resistance of manufacturers and recurring economic recessions undermined the faith of the membership and made hard-won concessions unenforceable. At the end of this period, as union officials seriously debated the dissolution of their International, mass demonstrations in the garment districts of New York, Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia rescued and invigorated the ILGWU.<sup>5</sup>

The New York shirtwaist workers' famous "Uprising of the 20,000" in 1909 established a permanent foothold for a union founded less than a decade earlier with 2000 members and a \$30 treasury. Beginning at several isolated factories, the strike soon engulfed over five hundred firms when the resolution to

wage a general walkout passed overwhelmingly at a mass meeting. The great multitude of strikers shocked ILGWU leaders, who had estimated that perhaps 3,000 workers would respond. The union lacked the strike funds necessary to provide bail and subsistence for its picketers and had no prior experience in handling such a formidable mass of people. Officials conducted rallies and seminars in English, Yiddish, and Italian, and despite the renting of twenty-four auditoriums some workers stood in the street.<sup>6</sup>

With the union on the brink of insolvency, the rich society women of the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) arrived to save the day. League members marched with strikers to discourage police brutality and raised \$49,000 in relief and bail money.<sup>7</sup> Although the WTUL succeeded in arousing great public sympathy for the workers, some elements of the press refused to acknowledge the harsh reality of the conflict. Editors of the New York Times featured front-page stories discussing the Astor family yacht and a hundred-pound pie given to President Taft, but ignored the six-month ordeal on the city's East Side.<sup>8</sup>

With the shirtwaistmakers' strike concluded, the ILGWU won several significant gains in what was labelled a mixed settlement. Most importantly, the union became the recognized negotiator for employees of 350 manufacturers, who agreed to a fifty-two hour week. These owners also promised to supply electric power and materials and pledged to end the petty

finances and penalties formerly levied in their shops. Unfortunately, the agreement failed to set standard wage rates or provide a system for the settlement of grievances, and within weeks the WTUL received reports of violations by the owners. A significant result of the conflict was the clear demonstration that women could unite in protest and remain resolute in the face of beatings, arrest, and imprisonment. It awakened the conscience of the nation and established an enduring female majority within the ILGWU.<sup>9</sup>

Other elements of the labor movement planned to mimic the tactics of the shirtwaist makers' locals even before the twenty-four week confrontation ended in a labor victory. Allied ILGWU cloakmakers paralyzed the industry when 55,000 walked off the job in 1910 to begin one of the largest strikes in American history.<sup>10</sup> The New York Times abandoned its earlier aloofness and admitted that the disturbance was "probably the largest strike in a single trade that has ever taken place in this city." Instead of reprinting earlier editorials defending the near-sanctity of the open shop, the Times bent to prevailing currents of opinion and supported the union, even furnishing copies of ILGWU daily instructions to picketers.<sup>11</sup> After six financially damaging weeks of stalemate against a well-financed and growing foe, New York's cloak manufacturers agreed to negotiate. The settlement, entitled the Protocol of Peace, embodied the proposals of future Supreme Court justice Louis D. Brandeis. The workers

gained a 54-hour week, ten paid holidays, sanitation controls, limited over-time, and the "preferential union shop" that eventually became a complete closed shop. Employers recognized the ILGWU as the official union and accepted an organized system of reconciling grievances. Shortly thereafter, in 1911, nineteen year-old David Dubinsky stepped off a ship and into the victory-charged atmosphere of New York's working community.<sup>12</sup>

The young man who clambered out of steerage and into the Empire City's Jewish ghetto had experienced more hardship and adventure than his age suggested. By his early teens, Dubinsky had completed an apprenticeship and was considered a master baker in his native city of Lodz. Participation in a local bakers' union and the Jewish Socialist Party of Poland (the Bund) soon led to Russian jails, followed by a two-year march into Siberian exile. Unwilling to spend his remaining days in a desolate subarctic village, the prisoner escaped, returned to Lodz, and illegally trekked through Germany to the United States.<sup>13</sup> Dubinsky's radical youth affected him for the rest of his life, causing him to adopt an enduring socialist outlook and commit his life to the fight against social and economic injustice. Subsequent experiences determined that unionism would be Dubinsky's tool to engender change.<sup>14</sup>

A few weeks after his arrival, the horror of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire confronted Dubinsky. The Triangle

Company, located on the top three floors of the Asch Building, had succeeded in defeating the union during the "Uprising of the 20,000" through the hiring of strikebreakers. As a result, the manufacturer denied employee demands for unlocked doors adjacent to the fire escapes-- fearing that ILGWU organizers would invade the shops and foment dissent. On March 25, just before the end of a shift, witnesses heard what was described as a muffled explosion. Minutes later smoke billowed from the Asch Building and shortly afterward 146 women succumbed to smoke and flames or leaped to their deaths. Firemen unfolded cloth and rope safety nets in an effort to save the frightened women, but these broke under the force of the victims' impact. That evening, the odor of blood pooling in the gutters panicked draft horses pulling wagonloads of coffins dispatched by the city. The ILGWU responded to the slaughter with sorrow and anger, calling a series of protest meetings that contributed to a \$120,000 fund collected for burial costs and aid for the orphaned.<sup>15</sup>

Shortly afterward-- perhaps in response to the tragedy-- Dubinsky rejected familial advice that he become a physician and began his training as a garment cutter. Still unable to communicate in English, the young Jew attended meetings of Local 10 of the ILGWU Cutters' Union and observed there the basic workings of an industrial labor organization.<sup>16</sup> Dubinsky's rise within Local 10 was rapid. He sat on the Local Executive Board by 1918, became vice-president in 1920

and president a year later, and emerged by 1922 as a leading figure in the New York labor movement and a member of the ILGWU National Executive Board. This remarkable acquisition of power was not achieved without political struggle.

Dubinsky and his lieutenants demonstrated that the old-timers placed personal gain ahead of legitimate union interests and then systematically worked to eliminate them. Accepting minimal pay and devoting exhausting hours to their jobs, the new leadership ousted corrupt inefficient administrators.<sup>17</sup>

Two factors contributed to the decline of the ILGWU in the years before Dubinsky's presidency: economic troubles and internal division. It is scarcely surprising that the Great Depression damaged the drive for labor organization in the United States, particularly in a fragile industry that suffered seriously during the recession of 1921.<sup>18</sup> Equally disruptive was an internecine clash between a Communist faction led by Louis Hyman and President Morris Sigman's right-wing majority. In July, 1926, the Communists sponsored a general strike of suit and coat shops that the national union felt obligated to support. After a five-month deadlock, the Communist-dominated Strike Committee refused a "right-wing deviationist" solution and voted to continue striking to receive "a little more." The employers who had offered pay raises refused to buckle further, and with most of the season gone the panicked union accepted a clearly inferior contract. The Strike Committee agreed to grant manufacturers a free hand

in firing workers and allowed the abolition of rules controlling the use of irresponsible subcontractors.<sup>19</sup>

Most observers agreed that the ILGWU was in a pitiable condition by the summer of 1932. The Communist faction had deserted the union and formed the Needle Trades Workers' Industrial Union, saddling the remnants of the ILGWU with a million dollar debt accumulated during the failed general strike.<sup>20</sup> Fewer than 40,000 members remained, and the shattered organization exerted little influence within the trade at large. At this juncture, President Benjamin Schlesinger (the successor of Morris Sigman) died after an extended illness and left David Dubinsky as the heir apparent. At an Executive Board meeting that June, eleven leading officials elected Secretary-Treasurer Dubinsky to the highest position in a union on the brink of oblivion.<sup>21</sup>

The New Deal legislation of the Roosevelt Administration caused a rebirth of the American labor movement and represented the salvation of the ailing ILGWU. Dubinsky described the period following the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) as "two months that shook the ladies' garment industry." Although the union was nearly penniless, the young president asked for volunteer organizers, resumed publication of the ILGWU journal Justice, and took the offensive by calling strikes in sixty cities.<sup>22</sup> May brought Dubinsky's first victory in a strike waged against Philadelphia dress manufacturers, who had defeated the union



in a brutal confrontation the previous year. The news of a triumph boosted needle workers' morale across the nation, and thousands of unemployed men and women volunteered for unpaid service.<sup>23</sup>

The union won its most momentous victory in the New York dress industry, which came to a complete standstill when 60,000 employees walked out in the largest work stoppage in ILGWU history. The picketers demonstrated such complete solidarity that the employers gave in after four days and accepted revolutionary terms. Contracts reinstated the closed shop, granted pay raises, and included provisions controlling child labor, working hours, subcontracting practices, and the piecework system. In the aftermath of the event, the ILGWU experienced a phenomenal expansion in membership, with 40,000 Italians, 4,000 Blacks, and 4,000 Hispanics joining 32,000 other employees in accepting union cards. Dubinsky's staff spent the autumn months mopping up in smaller clothing trades such as the scarf, blouse, underwear, embroidery, and knit-goods industries. Strikes seldom lasted longer than two weeks, and in all cases substantial pay increases resulted.<sup>24</sup>

At the ILGWU Chicago convention of 1934, the general executive board observed that "a veritable revolution" had occurred within the union. Membership stood at 200,000, eighty new locals operated under charter, and organization accounts contained a \$500,000 surplus. Employers had improved wages, hours, and working conditions in most large

manufacturing centers, and increasing numbers of supposedly unorganizable blacks and chicanos joined the ranks. On the west coast, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle had witnessed major garment strikes and the creation of ILGWU locals.<sup>25</sup> In the South clothing manufacturing had gradually increased and by the mid-1930's about five hundred establishments existed there. Texas became a major target for unionization, and Dallas workers waged three bitter strikes in 1936. However, the ILGWU made its most decisive advances in the region during and after World War Two, and gained only three to four thousand Southern members under the New Deal.<sup>26</sup> With most of the industry organized, the great era of striking came to a close. Although Dubinsky and his union would face trials in the years ahead, never again would bankruptcy and disintegration threaten. As the third largest union in the American Federation of Labor, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union became a major power broker.<sup>27</sup>

Aside from organization, one of the serious problems confronting Dubinsky during the New Deal (and later) was a continual battle against organized crime. Dating back to the 1920's, gangsters had operated in the New York garment district, offering owners protection from unionization in return for a percentage of their profits. The ILGWU hired its own hoodlums in response, and after major strikes many criminals emerged as factory owners. Shops that had "the connections" enjoyed more flexible union regulations, and

organizers foolish enough to make trouble there risked beatings or worse.<sup>28</sup>

Louis "Lepke" Buchalter and Albert Anastasia were underworld thugs who made a fortune through garment rackets during the first decade of Dubinsky's tenure. The FBI rated Lepke as one of the most dangerous criminals in the country, but took years to make their case and eventually track him down. Said to have ordered the slaying of seventy people, Lepke annually collected a million dollars from garment racketeering alone-- before dying in Sing Sing's electric chair in 1941. Albert Anastasia owned a chain of garment factories as well as a large fleet of garment trucks. The controller of a mafia guild of professional assassins, Anastasia escaped prosecution for murder because repeatedly witnesses disappeared. Never serving a day in prison, "Big Al" died in a gang war over Cuban gambling in 1957.<sup>29</sup>

After taking office, Dubinsky waged constant war upon the gangsters, recognizing that union workers ultimately suffered from rampant extortion and substandard conditions in protected shops. Despite periodic campaigns against corruption, the mafia maintained a firm control over the ILGWU Truckers' Local and continued to extort money from manufacturers. Although aware that certain union officials consorted with elements of organized crime, Dubinsky felt powerless to demand their resignations. He knew that honest replacements for corrupt officials would either be bought or murdered. One trade

association executive complained, "They're (the mafia) an evil growth on the body of the industry. And I tell you, they'll never be eliminated."<sup>30</sup> Unable to remove the hoodlums, Dubinsky pragmatically turned his energies to areas where success was attainable.

Revealing the continued influence of his socialist background, Dubinsky revived and expanded ILGWU welfare programs. The union provided medical care through the six-floor Union Health Center, which eventually added health education and ambulance services. Since the 1920's, the ILGWU had maintained a summer resort for garment workers in the Pocono Hills of Pennsylvania. Dubinsky realized the value that the vacation complex represented in terms of organization pride and prestige, especially because it was the largest union retreat in the country. Not content to rest on its progressive laurels, the International established a death benefit fund and eventually provided sickness and hospitalization pay. Scrupulously honest, the union president stretched the value of each benefit dollar and kept administrative costs to a minimum.<sup>31</sup>

From 1935 to 1938 the ILGWU took part in the great labor schism of the era, the AFL-CIO split. Led by John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers, Dubinsky and several other labor bosses formed the Committee for Industrial Organization. Members of this group were committed to mass industrial unionism as opposed to the traditional trade unionism of the

AFL. Convinced that the AFL was missing great organizing opportunities through its hostility to change, the Committee began forming its own industrial unions, which the Federation rejected. After the resignation of Lewis as AFL vice-president and the lack of any reconciliation, the AFL suspended the CIO for dual unionism at its 1936 convention.<sup>32</sup>

Dubinsky agonized over the decision to defy the AFL, but decided that his belief in industrial unionism took precedence over his warm feelings for the Federation. The ILGWU remained a part of the CIO until 1938, when Lewis abandoned all hopes for reunion and created the Congress of Industrial Organizations. In reaction to this move, Dubinsky removed his union from the CIO and led it as an independent force until a year and a half later, when the ILGWU reclaimed its place within the AFL. The garment union's president acted in this way, because he felt that a permanent division in the labor movement would prove a disaster, which it did. He realized that although the ILGWU had contributed its full share to CIO coffers, the International's influence within Committee councils had been limited. Rather than enjoy "a comfortable independence," Dubinsky felt duty-bound to rejoin the larger labor movement.<sup>33</sup> While the ILGWU never quite took center stage during the AFL-CIO clash, the significant part it did play confirmed the growth of the union's power. Possession of the ILGWU's half-million members gave the AFL a clear numerical advantage over the CIO after 1939.

A final confirmation of increased ILGWU vitality was the organization's participation in national politics. Although in the midst of collecting funds to aid victims of the Spanish Civil War, Dubinsky backed the re-election of Franklin D. Roosevelt with vigor. Republicans supported by the Hearst press attempted to label Dubinsky a Communist, but the scheme failed miserably. FDR defended the ILGWU chief on a national radio broadcast, and newspapers publicized his record of defiance against Communists within the union. In November most American citizens, like the garment workers, voted to re-elect Roosevelt, and David Dubinsky served as one of New York state's electors.<sup>34</sup>

The story of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union during the New Deal was one of growth. The organization spread its influence across the United States and into Canada, and membership expanded five-fold. David Dubinsky, an unknown Jewish immigrant in 1932, became an internationally known leader who visited the White House and sponsored philanthropy at home and abroad. The union became active in the major labor struggles of the era and participated in national political campaigns. It even found time to sponsor its own Broadway musical, "Pins and Needles," which became a smash hit.<sup>35</sup> Although the battle against organized crime proved futile and outside the International's traditional territory it sometimes received a bloody nose, the ILGWU enjoyed a golden age under the New Deal.

Several reasons for this success may be cited. Federal legislation supporting the legitimacy and rights of the American labor movement, especially section 7(a) of the NIRA and the NLRA, provided the legal protection and renewed confidence necessary for the great ILGWU offensives. Equally important was the superior leadership of President David Dubinsky, who inspired the love and dedication of toiling multitudes and became a living symbol of the organization he directed. Finally, expansion would not have occurred without widespread discontent among laborers about perceived injustices within the industry and the pervasive lack of union affiliation that still existed. Had ladies' garment workers already been associated with a competing organization, there would not have been as large an unorganized labor pool for the ILGWU to exploit. The other great garment workers' union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, organized the employees of the men's and children's garment industry instead. Without this combination of advantageous conditions, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union-- like a seedling deprived of its environmental necessities-- would not have flowered.

## Notes

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18 Joel Seidman. "The ILGWU in the Dubinsky Period." Labor History 9 (Spring 1968), 56.

19 Danish, The World of David Dubinsky, 54-55. Employers often had work done by subcontractors, who sometimes



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21 Seidman, "The ILGWU in the Dubinsky Period," 56-57.

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28 Lester Velie. Labor USA (New York: Harper Brothers, 1958), 108.

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31 Raymond and Mary Munts. "Welfare History of the ILGWU." Labor History 9 (Spring 1968), 87.

32 Edwin Young in Labor and the New Deal by Milton Derber ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), 62-63.

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### CHAPTER III

#### THE ILGWU LOS ANGELES DRESSMAKERS' STRIKE OF 1933

Morning greeted Los Angeles on the 12th of October, 1933, revealing an unseasonably cool and cloudy day. Throughout the waking metropolis working people and school children searched their closets and drawers for infrequently needed jackets and sweaters to break the brisk off-shore breeze that rattled newly sealed windows and rustled the tops of majestic palms.<sup>1</sup> Alone in a large rented loft building at 1108 South Los Angeles Street, Rose Pesotta paced nervously back and forth, intermittently glancing at her watch and wondering if somehow something had gone wrong. Two hours earlier dozens of union committee members had vanished into the dark streets carrying thousands of printed leaflets that bore the heading "Dressmakers' General Strike Declared Today!" Full of optimism, Pesotta had arrived the previous month aboard a TWA flight from Newark, New Jersey after President David Dubinsky of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) had dispatched her on a mission to organize the largely Hispanic dressmakers of Los Angeles. Now the veteran labor leader wondered if local manufacturers were correct in their confident prediction that all her efforts in the west would be in vain. Before she could

reflect further, the silence outside was broken and within minutes hundreds of women poured into the hall.<sup>2</sup>

The month-long struggle that erupted that Thursday morning warrants the attention of historians for several reasons. The Los Angeles dressmakers' strike was part of the nationwide wave of walkouts that resulted from the passage of the NRA. Writers and researchers should therefore consider it when making detailed examinations of the period's labor phenomena.<sup>3</sup> The strike also represented an important turning point for the Los Angeles ILGWU. The union failed to win a position of power and legitimacy comparable to that of eastern locals, reinforcing patterns that would persist for years. Garment manufacturers proved that they could preserve the open shop if they acted together and remained determined to thwart any attempts to bring change. The conflict demonstrated the weakness of the ILGWU and marked the end of the steady growth in membership that had begun in 1930. It became clear that the attempt to unionize the L.A. clothing industry would be a prolonged and difficult one.

Contemporary newspapers represent an important source of information about the strike, but are potentially misleading. Editors gave varying explanations of the exact cause of the confrontation, depending on which side they supported. Rose Pesotta stated that the clothing workers walked off the job in order to achieve "union recognition, a 35-hour week, a guaranteed minimum wage... and [the end of] flagrant

disregard of state sanitary and safety regulations."4 The New York Times agreed that low wages were an important point of contention, citing that "girls received less than \$5.00 a week, despite presidential re-employment agreements calling for a minimum of \$15.00."5 In contrast, the Los Angeles Times, owned by labor opponent William Randolph Hearst, described the conflict as focussing exclusively upon union recognition and enforcement of the closed shop. The L.A. Times warned its readers that "New York organizers [wish] to compel open-shop industry to submit to union domination." The paper further asserted that there was "no question of wages, hours of employment, or working conditions," and that "generous offers of holiday pay and a 35 hour week" on the part of owners had been of no avail.6

The Los Angeles Daily News, a pro-labor publication, generally depicted the strikers in a favorable light. The paper reported that a third of the six-thousand workers then employed in the central business district marched and displayed placards in front of the factories. While union members heckled shop managers and strikebreakers and sang defiant songs, the Daily News contended that "no disorder was created." The newspaper characterized ILGWU leaders as reasonable men and women attempting to acquire a majority of the dressmakers' signatures affirming union membership-- thereby gaining NRA recognition and a peaceful reconciliation.7

The Los Angeles Examiner adopted a neutral attitude, but included accounts of picket violence as well as the general information found in the Daily News column. Nathan Corn, a foreman at a local shop, claimed that after work he had been "mauled" by nine male strikers, one of whom was subsequently arrested for disturbing the peace. Later in the evening another group of protesting garment workers assaulted four newly-hired "scabs" in an alley behind the eight-hundred block of Broadway. The Examiner's editors carefully included both the union leadership's description of the "paralyzed garment district" and the manufacturer's assurances of "business as usual."<sup>8</sup>

Predictably, Hearst's L.A. Times estimated that a mere 1375 strikers (out of an estimated five thousand dressmakers) had joined the walkout and provided melodramatic accounts of the violent acts perpetrated by the "agitators." In an exclusive interview with Captain William Hynes of the Los Angeles police force's "Red Squad," the paper informed readers that pickets showered two carloads of nonunion workers with stones, and that "known Communists were involved." In response to such incidents, Police Commissioner Davis assigned Hynes and his squad to the strike area in order to protect employees and private property at the sixty shops under siege.<sup>9</sup>

Except for the publications mentioned above, the Los Angeles garment district revolt received only limited

exposure in other newspapers. The California Eagle, the city's preeminent black paper, carried no coverage whatsoever-- no doubt because at the time few blacks worked within the clothing industry.<sup>10</sup> The New York Times devoted one short article to the strike, which appeared to be supportive of the union interpretation of the conflict. Because ILGWU national headquarters was (and still is) located in Manhattan, it seems reasonable that President Dubinsky, Vice-president Israel Feinberg, and other influential members of the union elite may have had allies among Times staffers.<sup>11</sup> The California Jewish Voice, a Los Angeles weekly printed in Yiddish, published an article that supported the ILGWU. The Voice called for an end to all violence and expressed hope for a swift and just resolution.<sup>12</sup>

During the first week of the walkout, the recognition of an allied ILGWU cloakmakers' union intensified the resolve of picketing dressmakers and apparently swelled their ranks. Police Captain Hynes reported that several hundred additional women deserted the shops and took to the streets, bringing the protesters' total up to about 1700. The Associated Apparel Manufacturers (AAM) questioned this claim's accuracy and contended that "the strike is weakening, and women are returning to work."<sup>13</sup> The correspondence between Pesotta and Dubinsky reflected an opposite appraisal of the situation. Although telegrams wired to the New York office contained

complaints of a money shortage, they described the production in local garment plants as at a virtual standstill, and boasted of great public support for the union women. Drawing a comparison to earlier organizational efforts in New York City, Pesotta predicted that the strike would end in a "historic" labor victory.<sup>14</sup>

On the same day the optimistic union messages were being cabled to the national leadership in New York, Captain Hynes stated in a local press interview that the walkout was occurring at "the wrong time"-- at the end of the manufacturing season when laborers were traditionally in the least demand.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, President Dubinsky had expressed the same concern in a telegram dispatched to Rose Pesotta in late September, before the strike order was issued. Upon being notified that Los Angeles Local 65 planned to go on the offensive shortly before the end of the season, Dubinsky immediately responded by advising against "an early stoppage," apparently fearing defeat. As subsequent communications demonstrate, Feinberg and Pesotta elected to ignore the president's advice, because they felt that any delay in combating recent industrial oppression might destroy the credibility of the city organization-- which was in serious need of initiation dues.<sup>16</sup> As might be expected, the Los Angeles Times shared many of Officer Hynes' views concerning the ILGWU leaders' wisdom in staging a walkout. In a lengthy essay entitled "The Stupidity of

Strikes," the editor opined:

... nine times out of ten a strike is the result of stupid, corrupt, and selfish activity on the part of the labor "leader" who himself will not suffer in the least because a strike is called. It is safe to say nine in ten strikes are entirely avoidable, not desired by a majority of the workers, result in no gain to the strikers compared with their loss in time and pay, and definitely lower the standard of living not only for every participant, but for the entire nation. A strike is like war-- it is the poorest possible method of settling a dispute.<sup>17</sup>

The positioning of this editorial adjacent to the daily coverage of the garment industry conflict and its reference to the issue of union majorities leaves little question as to the story's intended target.

While members of the various elites debated the character and wisdom of the confrontation, in the garment district the level of violence intensified as the negotiation deadlock continued with no end in sight. Each morning, hundreds of picketers filled the sidewalks along Broadway between 7th and 9th Streets, often becoming embroiled in scuffles with strikebreakers and police. On Sunday officers arrested three protesters in what law enforcement officials described as a "brief free-for-all battle" between pickets and scabs.<sup>18</sup> The husband of a supposed strikebreaker, Frank Baldy of North Hollywood, was "severely beaten" as he escorted his wife from a Broadway shop to their car. The attackers escaped arrest, and Baldy was treated for cuts and



bruises at an area hospital and released.<sup>19</sup> An alternate version of the story denied that the couple was in any way involved with the strike, stating that they were misidentified by an unruly mob. Captain Hynes, commenting on the increased aggression in the streets, accused the union of making threats of violence and strengthened police security around twenty-two vulnerable clothing firms. Hynes hinted that his men would be "forced to get tough" if innocent citizens and private property were further threatened.<sup>20</sup>

Fragile tempers on all sides were probably aggravated as the cool weather of the previous week gave way to temperatures reaching into the mid-nineties. In an article commenting on the sudden arrival of "Indian summer," the Los Angeles Times cautioned readers to protect themselves against the oppressive temperatures and humidity that had already caused several elderly residents to be hospitalized.<sup>21</sup> The heat produced by hundreds of strikers crowded upon narrow sidewalks was probably intense, increasing the likelihood of violence.

By mid-week the police made good on their promise to drop "the kidglove method of handling offensive strikers," and ninety-five additional officers equipped with tear-gas canisters joined existing forces. Soon violence ebbed, in part due to the increased presence of the Red Squad, and in part because Rose Pesotta and other organizers coached picketers on how to behave. With the appearance of the

"tear-gas bombs," Pesotta instructed her girls to do nothing-- "just let the tears run down [your] faces" if the gas should be used. When the police learned that the strikers knew how to respond to the gas, they declined to use it for the duration of the struggle.<sup>22</sup> The arrival of a delegation of local ministers also served to temper the level of aggression, and on Thursday the 19th no injuries or arrests ensued. Several clergymen, including Dr. Roy L. Smith of the First Methodist Church, the Reverend Wesley G. Nicholson of Westwood Hills Congregational Church, and Dr. Allan Hunter of the First Unitarian Church, sought to investigate reports of police brutality. The Reverend Gross Alexander (denomination unidentified) quarrelled heatedly with police Lieutenant George Pfeiffer over the allegation that officers had beaten and intimidated striking women. Pfeiffer hotly denied the charge and threatened to arrest the pastor "if he created a disturbance." The only casualty of the day occurred when a patrolcar struck Frances Nuñez at 853 South Sante Street. A local hospital treated Nuñez and released her with an injured foot.<sup>23</sup>

Now that hundreds of workers had gone without an income for well over a week, the financial situation for many was fast becoming critical. To prevent the strikers from being forced back to work by hunger, the union provided food and emergency cash for scores of dressmakers and their families. Sympathetic merchants, especially those from the Hispanic

community, donated two hundred loaves of bread per day, as well as mass quantities of sugar, peanut butter, flour, rice, and coffee. Fresh supplies of lettuce, tomatoes, oranges, and cheese poured in as a Mexican radio station, El Eco de Mexico, broadcast the need for donations from its Tijuana studio. On the other hand, local utility companies-- supposedly in league with the AAM-- shut off the gas, electricity, and water of striking dressmakers as soon as payment became overdue. In response to this action, the local ILGWU office paid many impoverished picketers' bills and forced the resumption of basic services.<sup>24</sup> The use of union monies in this way, as well as the regular practice of bailing arrested men and women out of prison, reduced Los Angeles Local 65 to a state of near-bankruptcy.

Vice-President Feinberg wired Dubinsky in New York, requesting that he send funds immediately, because "victory now depends on your (Dubinsky's) support." Feinberg concluded his message with the plea, "remember your responsibility."<sup>25</sup> Manufacturers also increased the pressure on union employees by issuing a leaflet saying that the entire industry would be shut down for two months unless everyone returned to work. Pesotta rejoined that owners could hardly afford such a luxury, considering their "rents and overhead." Similar intimidation had been applied in New York and elsewhere, but had always proved to be a bluff. It cost far less to pay union wages than to shut down entire

businesses for even a short period of time.<sup>26</sup>

The lull in the fighting ended on Saturday, October 21, and clashes on the sidewalks between union supporters and strikebreakers reached their greatest intensity since the beginning of the confrontation. That afternoon angry pickets surrounded and attacked a carload of scabs accompanied by police escort at Pico and Main. A woman brandishing a pair of shears slashed Chloe Weaver, and nine strikers assaulted Claudia Artley. They lacerated her face, neck, and shoulders and "ripped her clothes to shreds."<sup>27</sup> Three men accosted a scab at 719 South Los Angeles Street where he was "thrown to the pavement and kicked," while pickets at a South Broadway shop "kicked and mauled" three strikebreakers. Police arrested seven union members on charges ranging from loitering and disturbing the peace to assault and battery, and in response to the day's violence, Captain Hynes "threatened to take absolute control of the strike." ILGWU Secretary Paul Berg reported on the same day that between three-thousand and four-thousand picketers were active and that the battle would continue until the employers capitulated. Captain Hynes estimated the true number of "agitators" as closer to 1750 and disputed the recent findings of the local investigating clergymen. A circular mailed to hundreds of area ministers by the Reverend Allan Hunter of Mount Hollywood Community Congregational Church concluded that the union justly demanded manufacturers'

compliance with NRA codes.<sup>28</sup>

Although headlines indicated that a settlement might be close at hand, the AAM blocked hopes for an arbitrated peace by refusing to cooperate with NRA mediator Campbell MacColloch. The owners stated that they would submit to a negotiated settlement only if the union called off the strike first. An unidentified union representative termed this proposal "the old ruse," and declared:

They've been stalling us off for weeks and weeks. They've broken faith repeatedly. They don't want to recognize our union because they know we will police the industry and force NRA members to live up to the code instead of allowing chiselers to hire women 60 hours a week and pay them \$3 or \$4 for the week's hire.

Fearing a renewal of the violence that had abruptly ended after MacColloch called his meeting the day before, Hynes announced that he planned to reinforce police ranks and maintain order.<sup>29</sup>

Newspaper headlines reported the arrest of former undercover policeman Jack Morrison on Thursday, October 26, for bribery and conspiracy. Morrison approached Sergeant R.F. Marburg of the metropolitan police and offered him \$800 for his assistance in a plot to break the union. The sergeant learned that he and his men would be well rewarded if they would "use clubs and beat up and arrest the strikers." A transfer of cash occurred on the following morning at a hotel near 8th and Main, at which time Marburg received "partial-payment"-- the balance of the money to be

paid when the strike concluded. Unfortunately for Morrison, Marburg informed his superior officer (Captain C.B. Horrell) between the meetings, and plainclothes detectives witnessed the exchange and made the arrest.<sup>30</sup> The following day officials announced to the press that J.M. Goldson, a dress manufacturer who owned a shop at 711 South Los Angeles Street, had apparently hired Jack Morrison as his representative in a conspiracy to "buy" Los Angeles policemen. While officers took Goldson into custody and the district attorney filed criminal charges for the incident, police never confirmed the involvement of other employers.<sup>31</sup>

Los Angeles Times coverage predictably played down the bribery scandal and emphasized continuing union violence instead. The editors praised the decision of police to engage in wholesale arrests in an effort to "halt brawls." Deputy City Attorney Maines instructed Captain Hynes to "bring them in by the wagon load and we'll issue charges against them and we'll see if this disorder can't be stopped." Union members attacked four more women in street scuffles, bringing the total "to nearly seventy" by the Hearst paper's estimate.<sup>32</sup>

By the final week of October, several developments indicated that the strike might soon be ended. At least two employers agreed to union demands and signed wage agreements with the ILGWU. Newspapers quoted David Haister, the owner of a cutting and pressing operation at 850 South Broadway, as

saying that ILGWU recognition was "the only way to cooperate 100 percent with the president's (FDR) recovery program." Haister further asserted that "the recovery program is doomed unless workers are given a decent wage. I believe that in signing the agreement I am complying with the program."<sup>33</sup> Employers began to indicate a willingness to negotiate and NRA representative Campbell MacColloch suggested three individuals as potential arbitrators. The proposed committee would include Rabbi Israel Isaacson of the Congregation Israel Synagogue, Mabel Socha, president of the Los Angeles Park Board, and Dr. J.L. Leonard, professor of economics at the University of Southern California. After a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce, employers declared that they would agree to arbitration with the strike still in effect, provided that union members curb the violence in the street. ILGWU Secretary Paul Berg responded by saying that law enforcement was the job of the police.<sup>34</sup>

The continuing battle to define the purpose of the strike came into clear focus during the waning days of October. On the 27th, the Los Angeles Times printed an editorial explaining a pro-employer interpretation of the union's motives:

Even if the strikers had a real grievance, tactics of this sort [violence] could not be tolerated. But they have not even this excuse. The strikers themselves emphasize that this is not a strike over wages, hours, or working conditions, but only for the closed shop, which means for the principle that every worker in the garment industry must pay

tribute to some labor leader to hold his job. The article went on to criticize city authorities for not "cracking down" early enough to prevent "the assaults, the riots, and the obstruction of sidewalks that have characterized this disturbance."<sup>35</sup>

Three days later the Illustrated Daily News printed a captioned photograph entitled "Girl Workers Air Grievances." Despite the Times' definition of low wages as a non-issue, seventy-two garment workers filed complaints at the offices of the State Industrial Welfare Commission against nine Los Angeles firms. The Daily News pictured one young woman, Peggy Henry, displaying a time card indicating that she had labored thirty-two hours only to receive 90 cents.<sup>36</sup> The local ILGWU newsletter, the Organizer, made it equally clear that wage-rates were a central issue to both the picketers and the union. Released in both Spanish and English, the letter attacked the payment of "slave wages" and told laborers that "conditions in the Los Angeles dress industry are the worst in the country."<sup>37</sup>

Although November promised to usher in a speedy strike settlement, it also arrived on the heels of the mass arrests long threatened by City Hall and police spokesmen. Twice on October 31 and again on November 1, officers loaded the paddy wagons-- called "Black Marias"-- with union women accused of violating clauses of the city's public protest ordinance.<sup>38</sup> Police seized fourteen in the eight hundred block of South



Broadway during the peak of afternoon shopping and took them to the Lincoln Heights Jail. There the strikers refused bail and spent the night in prison singing labor songs that deprived the jail's matron of her accustomed rest. According to Pesotta, by this late stage in the conflict some policemen began to demonstrate union sympathies. Law officials had received the scorn of the press for their supposed leniency, which may in part account for this change of heart. Lieutenant George Pfeiffer, the man who had earlier threatened the investigating pastor with arrest, was one such officer. Upon witnessing a crowd of strikers yelling "scab" at arriving carloads of strikebreakers, Pfeiffer encouraged the demonstrators. He "lifted his arms like an orchestra conductor" and shouted "now girls, all together!" On cue, the line of women roared at their opponents.<sup>39</sup>

The newly formed NRA mediation board met on November 2 to hear the testimony of both sides in an effort to unravel the tangle of rhetoric and determine which-- if either-- side was right. Charles J. Katz, the AAM attorney, repeated the contention that "there has been no clash between employers and employees on wages, hours and working conditions." Katz went on to claim that "something deeper and more sinister" was occurring-- "workers trying to force the union upon the employers." Vice-President Feinberg challenged Katz by observing that sweatshops "can be found in the finest factory building in Los Angeles when workers' weekly pay envelope

contains only \$5 or \$6." Several dressmakers provided testimony regarding blacklisting within the clothing industry and quoted one employer as saying, "To hell with the Blue Eagle! I'm running my own shop and if you don't like it you can get out." The conference ended with AAM Secretary Arthur Booth pledging that his organization would discuss "wages, hours, and other vital matters."<sup>40</sup>

The following day, the cross-examination of witnesses continued before the arbitration board, with AAM lawyer Charles Katz again going on the offensive. He asserted that 1339 employees in forty-two factories were not ILGWU members and that within those firms they represented a majority. Surely such "men" should not be forced to accept union "domination!" Then Feinberg and his associates presented six witnesses who swore that their bosses routinely made them stay at work without pay until assigned a task. A number of women told the committee that in some shops seamstresses did not know their wage-rate for piecework until payday arrived.<sup>41</sup>

Saturday, November 4, marked the final meeting of the arbitration board and the official end of the twenty-four day stand-off. Employers and ILGWU spokesmen argued in session until 11 p.m., at which time the entire assembly retired to City Hall to hear the NRA Committee's verdict. The committee presented the union with an "order" that included the following:

The present strike in the garment industry is to be called off and the status quo existing prior to October 12, 1933 restored. The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, on behalf of its members, shall in the first instance take up all complaints with the employers and/or the employers representatives and in the event of a dispute or disagreement the dispute shall be referred to this board...42

Pesotta, Feinberg, and other ILGWU leaders were dissatisfied. Without any definite arrangements for enforcement the owners might easily flout all their commitments and return to stalling tactics or worse.43 Rose Pesotta encouraged union members to respect the resolution, because a legal order would be nigh impossible to fight, and a system for airing grievances-- whatever its deficiencies-- had been established.44 Vice-President Feinberg, in contrast, cabled David Dubinsky informing him that because the manufacturers were already betraying their promises, the "absolutely disgusted" union membership must continue its strike. Within two days, however, the vice-president reversed himself and stated that the "dull condition" of the industry made acceptance of the settlement terms imperative. In the final analysis, Feinberg considered the struggle victorious because the union secured recognition and could now legally engage in collective bargaining. The Mexican clothing workers could claim a moral victory, because they had stood up to American bosses and maintained their personal dignity-- even at the price of going to jail.45

In examining the conflicting assertions made by the owners and the ILGWU concerning the strike's basic intent, it is clear that the union presented a more convincing case. Nearly all other sources refuted AAM claims that "wages, hours, and working conditions" were not relevant to the strike, including the statement made by AAM Secretary Arthur Booth referring to these issues as "vital matters." Confidential correspondence between union leaders, an incisive reflection of their real thoughts, repeat the essential facts printed in ILGWU public statements about wages and working conditions.<sup>46</sup>

The results of the strike, as Pesotta, Feinberg, and other ILGWU chiefs admitted, were mixed. The return to the status quo of October 12 meant that the picketers received no pay increases, reduction in hours, or improvement in working conditions. Workers did emerge from their ordeal "united in spirit" and represented by a legally recognized union where "suspicion and seclusiveness" had reigned before.<sup>47</sup>

Several factors may be cited to explain the union's partial failure. First, the workers resisted a well financed foe that had the police on its side. The ILGWU, in contrast, proved unwilling or unable to send the resources necessary to continue a work stoppage indefinitely. Second, with the garment season almost over, the employers' need of laborers reached a seasonal low. Hence, the ILGWU lacked the muscle that powers a strike. Third, both the manufacturers' and the

union's tally of the strikers revealed that a majority failed to walk off the job. For whatever reason, the ILGWU failed to convince enough workers to gamble on the results of a conflict, and the total industrial paralysis that would have brought a better agreement never materialized. The hiring of scabs to take the place of those who did join the picket line intensified this problem. Finally, Los Angeles lacked the union tradition existing in New York City and other eastern centers. It was to be expected that the going would be tough until the ILGWU became a more accepted part of the local shop system.

How economically justified was the strike? Statistics compiled by the United States Department of Commerce revealed that even reported incomes, in all likelihood superior to those obtained in illegal operations, often fell below the fifteen dollar minimum set by the NRA.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, the net profits of factory owners continued to climb despite the arrival of the depression in 1929. In the state of California, one hundred and fifty-three percent more garment workers were hired in 1933 than in 1927, reflecting a growth rate well in excess of that experienced in York City.<sup>49</sup>

Manufacturers' accusations that union organizers acted only in their own self-interest appear unfounded in light of the large quantities of cash freely distributed to financially distressed households and arrested picketers in need of bail money.<sup>50</sup> The treasury records of Los Angeles

Local 65 reported the collection of only \$570 in dues between April 1, 1932 and April 30, 1934. The national office in New York contributed a far greater amount of money to the Los Angeles area than the membership had to pay.<sup>51</sup>

The dressmakers' strike left the ILGWU with the potential to achieve its goals, depending upon the actions of the leadership and future economic developments. In the years that followed, had union chiefs worked together and acquired sufficient financial resources, they might have mounted a successful organizing campaign. Had the union spent generous sums on literature and conspicuous projects, it might have impressed workers with its dynamism. If a majority of area garment workers had lent their support to a dynamic ILGWU, perhaps striking would have ended the open shop. But advances could only be made if the economy remained stable and the demand for labor high. The next chapter will examine how the Los Angeles ILGWU's potential remained unrealized throughout the 1930's and up to the United States's entry into World War Two.

## Notes

- 1 Los Angeles Times, 12 October 1933.
- 2 Rose Pesotta, Bread Upon the Waters (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1944), 38.
- 3 David A. Shannon, Between the Wars: America, 1919-1941 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), 183-84.
- 4 Pesotta, Bread Upon the Waters, 31.
- 5 New York Times, 13 October 1933.
- 6 Los Angeles Times, 13 October 1933.
- 7 Los Angeles Illustrated Daily News, 13 October 1933.
- 8 Los Angeles Examiner, 13 October 1933.
- 9 Los Angeles Times, 14 October 1933. The hostility of the times was asserted in the ILGWU magazine Justice on 1 October 1933, p. 8.
- 10 California Eagle (Los Angeles), 1 October-25 November 1933. By 1950, with the growth of the sports wear industry, blacks would constitute a sizable percentage of L.A. needle workers.
- 11 New York Times, 13 October 1933
- 12 California Jewish Voice (Los Angeles), 26 October 1933.
- 13 Los Angeles Examiner, 14 October 1933.
- 14 Rose Pesotta to David Dubinsky, Dubinsky Correspondence, Cornell University Labor Management Documentation Center, Ithaca, New York. Hereafter the Labor Management Documentation Center will be cited (LMD).
- 15 Pesotta to Dubinsky, 15 October 1933, (LMD).
- 16 Israel Feinberg to David Dubinsky, 25 September 1933, (LMD).
- 17 Los Angeles Times, 17 October 1933.
- 18 Los Angeles Examiner, 17 October 1933.

- 19 Los Angeles Illustrated Daily News, 17 October 1933.
- 20 Los Angeles Times, 17 October 1933.
- 21 Los Angeles Times, 18 October 1933.
- 22 Pesotta, Bread Upon the Waters, 50.
- 23 Los Angeles Examiner, 19 October 1933.
- 24 Pesotta, Bread Upon the Waters, 43.
- 25 Feinberg to Dubinsky, 29 October 1933, (LMD).
- 26 Pesotta, Bread Upon the Waters, 43.
- 27 Los Angeles Illustrated Daily News, 21 October 1933.
- 28 Los Angeles Examiner, 21 October 1933.
- 29 Los Angeles Illustrated Daily News, 24 October 1933.
- 30 Ibid., 26 October 1933.
- 31 Ibid., 27 October 1933.
- 32 Los Angeles Times, 26 October 1933. The writer counted less than twenty after combining other sources.
- 33 Los Angeles Illustrated Daily News, 26 October 1933.
- 34 Los Angeles Examiner, 27 October 1933.
- 35 Los Angeles Times, 27 October 1933.
- 36 Los Angeles Illustrated Daily News, 31 October 1933.
- 37 The Organizer, undated (late Sptember 1933)
- 38 Los Angeles Illustrated Daily News, 1 November 1933
- 39 Pesotta, Bread Upon the Waters, 51-52.
- 40 Los Angeles Illustrated Daily News, 2 November 1933.  
The Blue Eagle was the symbol of the NRA.
- 41 Los Angeles Times, 3 November 1933.
- 42 Los Angeles Illustrated Daily News, 7 November 1933.
- 43 Pesotta, Bread Upon the Waters, 54-55.



44 Ibid., 57.

45 Feinberg to Dubinsky, 20 November 1933, (LMD).

46 David Dubinsky Correspondence, September 1933-June 1934, (LMD).

47 Pesotta, Bread Upon the Waters, 340-41.

48 U.S. Department of Commerce, Census of Manufacturing, (Washington Printing Office, 1914,1923,1930,1933.)

49 Paul Berg to David Dubinsky, 20 November 1933, (LMD).

50 Los Angeles Times, 18 October 1933. The AAM compared union leaders to carpetbaggers.

51 22nd ILGWU Convention, Reports and Proceedings, Spring 1934.

52 Los Angeles Citizen, 14 October 1933.

## CHAPTER IV

### FRUSTRATION: 1934-1941

After the dressmakers' strike was settled, the Los Angeles ILGWU met with frustration for the remainder of the New Deal era. Union objectives of attaining industry wide recognition, increased wages, improved working conditions, and the closed shop remained unrealized in a significant portion of the clothing industry. This failure was in large part the result of disunity among union leaders already encumbered by the stubborn resistance of regional manufacturers. Because the efforts of a decade yielded only modest gains, ILGWU publications tended to limit coverage about Southern California. Frequently, the editors of Justice (the ILGWU bi-monthly magazine) failed to report on how the Los Angeles garment workers were faring for several months at a time, only to break their silence with a short article encouraging continued hope and announcing the latest social event designed to maintain morale. The union's chronicle of its own progress, ILGWU News-History, was completely mute about Los Angeles in the four installments that appeared between 1933 and 1945. After the conclusion of the 1933 walkouts, the union virtually ceased to exist as far as the city press was concerned. Only an AFL-affiliated labor weekly, the Citizen, afforded the ladies' garment

workers frequent local publicity (despite the union's two-year association with the CIO), and the Citizen also lapsed into occasional silence. This reduction in contemporary coverage in part explains why no comprehensive history has focussed upon the Los Angeles ILGWU after the brief drama of the dressmakers' revolt. The following pages will, therefore, examine and analyze this chapter of the union's history prior to the outbreak of the Second World War.

By the final weeks of 1933, the Los Angeles locals faced a grave situation. Work within the garment district completely halted awaiting the beginning of the spring season, and former strikers found themselves without an income despite the November settlement. Repeatedly, Pesotta implored Dubinsky to wire money because the new locals required eight hundred dollars a month merely to cover payroll, rents, and other necessities-- and as yet members could pay no dues. Sensing the power of their position, many employers refused to honor their promises to rehire union members and openly pledged to defy NRA pay scales.<sup>1</sup> Confronted with news of the grim situation, Dubinsky reminded the Los Angeles leadership of his earlier advice against striking and demanded that they economize. The walkout had been far too expensive, he asserted, and costly enterprises such as the printing of the Organizer should be terminated. Pesotta received a blunt reprimand for failing to keep the

New York office sufficiently informed, and Dubinsky curtly denied her plea that he visit Los Angeles.<sup>2</sup>

That there were no significant ILGWU strikes in Los Angeles during the next two years resulted from several factors. Declining production brought on by hard times reduced union dues as well as the number of jobs and provided the owners with a large pool of potential strikebreakers. These conditions prompted the Executive Board to adopt a defensive policy of waiting, because to do otherwise would be disastrous. No benefits would be available for strikers if a stoppage was called, and blacklisting might prevent militant workers from ever rejoining the garment trades. The leadership that had organized the 1933 campaigns dispersed to other locales, with Pesotta departing to San Francisco and Feinberg to Portland, Seattle, and other west coast cities within his jurisdiction. Therefore, Bill Busick, Ivan Lutsky, and other ILGWU officers who remained behind faced the task of restoring stability and momentum as best they could.<sup>3</sup>

An organizing drive consumed the first half of 1934, but achieved only partial success. The International founded a new dressmakers' organization, Local 97, and made yet another effort to enroll all seven thousand dress workers in the union.<sup>4</sup> Opinions diverge on the reasons behind the slow rate of growth, but membership rolls reveal an indisputable reality. A year after the organizing effort began, the ILGWU

reported only 2,460 members in Los Angeles. Of these, only 1,100 were employed in the silk, wool, and cotton dress industries, with the remainder working in cloak, sportswear, and undergarment shops.<sup>5</sup> Communist obstruction tactics created one obstacle, as elements of the disbanded Needle Trades Industrial Union attempted to "bore from within." The Communists distributed propaganda that attacked the established leadership, filibustered committee meetings, and cited the current avoidance of striking as proof of the leadership's cowardice. Fear of being added to the blacklist-- the manufacturers' illegal directory of people systematically denied employment-- probably hindered recruiting efforts, as did many local employees' mistrust of eastern outsiders.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the renewal of contracts with local dress manufacturers allowed the ILGWU to claim 1934 as a year of victory.

Conferences held between union representatives and owners produced a two-year covenant that was to be valid until July 1, 1936. As its major concession, the ILGWU agreed to yield its power to strike, and promised to obey the rulings of the "impartial" arbitration board that had tendered the disappointing strike settlement of the previous November. Employers pledged to recognize the union's authority to speak for its members, agreed to pay NRA wages, and promised to uphold a seven-hour day and a five-day week. Both parties combined to help finance group death and

disability insurance, and union negotiators believed that the open shop would soon be abandoned.<sup>7</sup> Although Dubinsky joined Los Angeles banqueters in celebrating their arbitration victory, the negative aspects of the agreement are clear.<sup>8</sup> In exchange for the employers' concessions-- which in large part amounted to their agreement to obey existing labor laws-- the ILGWU openly forsook its most powerful weapon, the ability to call a strike. Communist characterizations of union chiefs as collaborators appeared confirmed, and the contract still allowed the continued exploitation of the non-union majority, which employers could easily intimidate into remaining outside the ladies' garment locals. For many manufacturers, the agreement seemed a cheap method of silencing the troublemakers while maintaining an open shop. Owners and managers routinely broke the terms of union contracts and believed their actions vindicated by the Schechter decision which declared the NRA to be unconstitutional in 1935. Here the situation stood until the pact's expiration in mid-1936, at which time both parties felt sufficiently strengthened to resume a struggle temporarily deferred, but not decided.<sup>9</sup>

The ILGWU began consolidating its strength during the weeks prior to the July contract termination date by renewing efforts to organize non-union dressmakers and by waging several minor confrontations with pajama and underwear manufacturers. The General Executive Board met in Los

Angeles for the first time and granted its approval to plans for a walkout. Local leaders led by Vice-President Feinberg insisted upon the closed shop in all dressmaking firms and opened negotiations with owners in hopes of avoiding a clash.<sup>10</sup> When these talks reached an impasse, union chiefs gave the order and some three thousand dressmakers abandoned the shops and began picketing.<sup>11</sup>

Shortly after the strike was called, conditions began to resemble those of the great dressmakers' strike of 1933. Police Captain William Hynes arrived with his infamous Red Squad, and incidents of violence erupted as crowds of pickets collided with strikebreaking workers and police escorts. At the intersection of Seventh and Flower Streets, a large scuffle broke out, after which police arrested and interrogated Bernard Hyman, a union member accused of attacking strikebreakers. When news of the arrest became public, ILGWU organizer Lutsky accused the manufacturers of conspiring with police to provoke the incident. Lutsky claimed that the owners hoped to incite brawls and then use the violence as a pretext for gaining a court injunction to prevent picketing. If such was the case, the scheme soon went awry when twenty-five witnesses testified that Hyman was innocent of wrongdoing and had actually attempted to calm the uneasy crowd before the arrival of Hynes's men.<sup>12</sup> A later investigation by the U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor confirmed suspicions of police corruption by

discovering that during this period the Merchants and Manufacturers' Association paid Hynes \$769 for police lunches and dinners. The Association also expended in excess of a thousand dollars for the hiring of off-duty cops and "special detectives," whose sole responsibility was to defeat the upstart clothing workers.<sup>13</sup> Despite this substantial outlay of capital, within a few days a majority of the owners decided to avoid a costly repetition of the 1933 walkout and to accept a settlement with their labor foes.

After four days of crowded sidewalks and idle machines, the owners of fifty-six shops employing some 2600 workers signed contracts with ILGWU representatives. The agreements established minimum weekly wages of twenty-eight dollars for women and thirty-five dollars for men and enacted a thirty-five hour week. The manufacturers agreed to enforce the closed shop by November 1, 1936, with the understanding that the union would proceed to organize the remainder of the city's dress trade. Although some stubborn entrepreneurs continued their resistance, thus prompting four hundred women to maintain picket lines, ninety percent of the dress manufacturers pledged to cooperate. La Opinión, a major Spanish language newspaper in Los Angeles, ran the front-page headline "Triumph at Last for the Clothing Workers," and to most observers this seemed to be the case.<sup>14</sup> Events would demonstrate, however, that the open shop was well entrenched in a city famous for its sunshine, movie stars, and defiance



of organized labor.

Several factors served to undermine the 1936 campaign. Throughout the remainder of the year, the intransigent minority of open-shop dress manufacturers held its ground, supported by the Southern California Garment Manufacturers' Association.<sup>15</sup> The Los Angeles Times, the Illustrated Daily News, and other local newspapers ignored most minor strikes and printed hostile stories about labor "terrorism" purportedly inspired by radical outsiders. These editorial practices discouraged the rise of public support that might have translated into political action. Because of the availability of cheap labor in the city, which was steadily augmented by the arrival of thousands of Dust Bowl refugees, a determined employer usually found ample replacements for "disloyal" workers. Late in November, 1936, weeks after the deadline for the initiation of the closed shop, a committee of dressmakers visited the city office of the State Division of Industrial Welfare. This delegation charged that employers falsified time cards, paying some women as little as three dollars a week.<sup>16</sup> Unless the ILGWU could make good on its promise to unionize the entire industry, the unorganized shops would out-sell competitors with cheaply produced merchandise. The result might be a general repudiation of the new contracts.

After the holidays, Feinberg declared that he found "Labor, organized as well as unorganized, ready as never

before in its history to demand a greater share in the returning prosperity of the nation."<sup>17</sup> Despite this assessment, the Ladies' Garment Workers did not enjoy great victories during the new year. In response to a deepening local recession, a decline in overall output marked the Los Angeles garment manufacturing season during 1937. Although the General Executive Board pledged to set aside \$500,000 for a new national organization campaign, there is little evidence that Los Angeles benefited from the fund.<sup>18</sup> When the ILGWU held its yearly election of officers in February, less than two thousand cutters, pressers, dressmakers, and cloakmakers cast votes. Such a turnout suggests either worker apathy or an overall absence of union growth during the previous four years.<sup>19</sup>

The formation of a wealthy opposition group named Southern Californians, Incorporated undermined the effort to renew the organizing drive in the dress shops. A creation of the Los Angeles Merchants and Manufacturers Association and the Chamber of Commerce, the Southern Californians spent thousands of dollars on anti-labor propaganda and lobbied for the passage of a city ordinance to outlaw picketing. The defeat of this scheme absorbed much of the ILGWU's energy and attention, thereby reducing the amount of resources allocated to the fight for reforms.<sup>20</sup> After weeks of pleading their case to the city fathers, union lawyers and spokesman convinced only two councilmen to cast dissenting votes. Only

Mayor Frank L. Shaw's bold veto prevented the passage of the law, which had already received the affirmative vote of the City Council.<sup>21</sup>

The International achieved several notable successes that gave credibility to Feinberg's claim that the Los Angeles locals had made "steady advances in the struggle of our workers." Clearly the most significant achievement was the second renewal of the cloakmakers' contract that arbitrators first drafted back in 1933. Instead of merely maintaining the status quo, the cloakmakers won a general ten percent wage increase and the reduction of the current 35-hour week to 32.5 hours (the same as in New York).<sup>22</sup> Besides this reassertion of cloakmaker clout, the union waged several minor strikes that, despite their inconclusiveness, rallied the spirits of members. One involved the Darling Dress Shops at Ninth and Los Angeles, where two hundred women picketed for weeks, suffering repeated physical assaults by police. The situation gained the attention of Mayor Shaw after two women required hospitalization, and a "full investigation" of police behavior followed.<sup>23</sup>

More problematic was a conflict at the Vogel Brothers' Coat Factory, an "open shop fortress" enclosed by barbed-wire and guards, where 160 women struck for higher wages and union recognition. The firm had fled to the suburbs to escape unionization, and its owners boasted about their business's "immunity" as the only unorganized coat shop on the coast.

The ILGWU strike halted production and provided dramatic evidence of union militancy but failed to break the will of the management.<sup>24</sup> The following year the Ladies' Garment Workers challenged the Vogel brothers again, this time before the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), after the owners decided to form a company union. The ensuing investigation and proceedings consumed many months until finally, in 1940, a decision was handed down. Although early findings by a trial examiner supported the ILGWU's position, the Board's final ruling dealt the union a stinging defeat. The NLRB recognized the legitimacy of the company union, the Independent Garment Workers' Union, and dismissed the complaint against the Vogel organization.<sup>25</sup> In late 1937, without knowing that the struggle against Ben, Joseph, and Leo Vogel had just begun, a weary Feinberg acknowledged that "our unions on the Pacific Coast still have quite a world to conquer before they may call their task complete."<sup>26</sup> As the manufacturing trio would reveal, the ILGWU had no monopoly on stubbornness and tenacity.

A decade later Pesotta observed that during this period "the ILGWU's local leadership had failed its members miserably." The organization suffered from internal squabbling and failed to win the loyalty of newcomers to the trades. Gradually the dress industry declined in overall importance as manufacturers changed over to the production of sportswear-- which was not covered by union contracts.

Several dress locals within the city folded, until by the end of the decade only Cotton Dress Local 266 remained.<sup>27</sup>

Reviving union activities within the dressmaking industry became an important priority. The ILGWU also turned its attention to the growing sportswear trades that appeared to represent the future of the region's clothing business.

In the midst of mass unemployment among dress and coatmakers during a spring season "slow in developing," the ILGWU fought to maintain its members' morale in 1938. Organizers won a settlement with the Chic Lingerie Company, the largest producer of its kind in the city, prompting Feinberg to assert that "our position on the West Coast has not been weakened even by the recession."<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the shut-down of most of the garment district forced leaders to delay confronting their enemies. Instead, the union sponsored mandolin, choir, and "physical culture" classes, as well as a baseball team and a lecture series. Bill Busick, Pesotta's former lieutenant during the 1933 dressmakers' strike, found himself directing a "series of round table discussions for [union council] chairladies in the dress industry."<sup>29</sup> Morris G. Axelrod, chairman of L.A. Cutters' Local 84, appealed for financial assistance to the unemployed and announced plans to cooperate with a federal theater project.<sup>30</sup> The ILGWU Broadway hit "Pins and Needles" provided needed diversion for the city's beleaguered clothing workers, performing to sellout crowds with seats selling for

as high as \$5.50.<sup>31</sup>

Feinberg summed up conditions that autumn in an article entitled "Riding the Gale in West Coast Garment Trades." Moderate unemployment existed in area cloak shops, but difficulties in the dress establishments were "much more pronounced." The open shop persisted at many firms, and Feinberg described a large number of companies as "operating on a shoe string." Subsequent to the abolition of the NRA, many workers toiled more than forty-four hours a week and received three to five dollars in return.<sup>32</sup> For these employees, nothing had changed since 1933.

Because of the ILGWU's failure to reform these conditions, the dress manufacturers under contract refused to renew their agreement when the expiration date arrived the following July. They complained that the open shop still prevailed in the wool and silk dress trades and that cheaper non-union merchandise seriously eroded profits. Such underselling led to inevitable bankruptcy.<sup>33</sup>

The International's response was to call a meeting of dressmakers and ask their permission to order a walkout. Work ceased in thirty-five factories at 2:30 p.m. on June 22, 1939 to give all employees the chance to vote. With only a week until the old contract's termination, the members agreed to strike.<sup>34</sup> Employers requested a conference to negotiate a settlement, and both sides accepted a temporary pact lasting until August. Experienced veterans of earlier

confrontations, neither party wished to gamble on an expensive work stoppage that might cause financial disaster for everyone involved.<sup>35</sup> Officials announced a new three-year contract to 1,100 dressmakers who crowded into the Labor Temple auditorium on 11 August. Feinberg informed the assembled men and women that the new agreement included one and one-quarter time pay for over-time and asked for their ratification. The crowd enthusiastically gave its assent and pledged to cooperate to gain "union conditions among unorganized shops."<sup>36</sup>

During the 1939 season, the ILGWU enjoyed one notable victory in its continued effort to end the reign of the open shop among Los Angeles clothing manufacturers. The union waged a marathon eleven-week strike against the David Shann sportswear shop in protest over low wages and "sweatshop conditions." Police arrested five strikers on assault charges, which the defendants appealed after a stay at Lincoln Heights Jail. Afterwards, the proprietors themselves encountered the weight of the justice system, facing criminal charges for breaking State minimum-wage regulations and for failing to produce financial records.<sup>37</sup> The next month the Shann firm capitulated and signed a contract granting sole bargaining power to the ILGWU, a forty hour week, an eighteen dollar weekly minimum, and paid holidays. For the twenty women who had paced the sidewalk for seventy days, suddenly a "new deal" arrived.<sup>38</sup> But thousands of others in non-union

shops toiled on with no changes in the foreseeable future.

In the waning days of the 1930's, the ILGWU president reorganized the west coast locals, firing or reassigning almost every office holder. Dubinsky recalled Feinberg, the Vice-president in charge of the Pacific Coast, for service on the Joint Cloak and Dress Board in his native New York-- permanently removing him from this story.<sup>39</sup> Louis Levy, a middle-aged New Yorker who suffered from poor health, assumed the west coast leadership and took up his new duties from a sickbed. Dubinsky fired Lutsky, manager of the Los Angeles Cloak and Dress Board, because of his Communist connections. A former party member himself, Lutsky allegedly awarded key positions to "Reds" who "did the union much harm." The Communists within the ILGWU had waged a bitter struggle with their opponents during the previous decade, and Lutsky's firing marked their definitive defeat. His replacement was George Wishnak, a veteran labor leader from New York.<sup>40</sup> Organizer Bill Busick became embroiled in a scandal involving an agreement he had negotiated with Hollywood Maxwell Lingerie the year before. An investigation by the Regional Labor Board revealed that Busick had sabotaged ILGWU unionization efforts in return for cash and had supported NLRB sponsored elections that would establish a company union at Hollywood Maxwell. In the meantime Busick had left the Ladies' Garment Workers for a position with Furniture Workers' Local 1561. When the Labor Board's findings became



public, Busick lost his new job despite denials of wrongdoing and moved to Las Vegas.<sup>41</sup> Then on the first day of the new year, Justice announced the imminent return of Rose Pesotta to Los Angeles after a six-year absence from the city.<sup>42</sup>

With sweeping changes in the west coast leadership came announcements of a new campaign to combat the continuing problems that had frustrated the former labor chiefs. A January article in Justice admitted that sixty percent of Los Angeles dressmakers and all of the sportswear workers remained unorganized. Even within the cloak trade, which had enjoyed something approaching a closed shop since 1933, contract jobbers remained without collective bargaining.<sup>43</sup> On January 15, 1940, Pesotta initiated the first move in the new offensive by picketing a fashion show that was marketing non-union merchandise. ILGWU women in evening clothes blocked the sidewalks in front of the Biltmore Hotel, capturing more attention than the review inside and prompting the management to summon police.<sup>44</sup> In a newspaper article the following day, the pageant director offered Pesotta his grudging congratulations, saying, "That was a clever stunt. You stole the show."<sup>45</sup>

More serious union resistance began in early February, when five hundred machine operators, cutters, finishers, and pressers walked off the job. Among the firms affected were Hamburger Apparel, the L. Marcus Company, Barry-Newburg Apparel, and Merritt Cloaks-- all of which capitulated and

agreed to union wage rates and a 35-hour week. Cutters and pressers at the Twentieth Century Company joined the general strike, as did Carolina Frocks and the Hollywood Novelty Fashions shop. As members of the Merchants and Manufacturers' Association, the owners at Twentieth Century vowed continued resistance, but the latter firms quickly agreed to sign union contracts. A confident Pesotta declared, "We are taking these shops out one at a time."<sup>46</sup>

Direct confrontation ebbed for the remainder of the spring season as the union completed necessary chores before returning to battle. April elections of officers reflected the revitalization the new administration had brought when collectively locals 65, 84, 96, and 97 polled nearly four thousand votes.<sup>47</sup> ILGWU members filled the Los Angeles Labor Temple, where they agreed to raise fifteen thousand dollars in the next few months to begin an immediate "crusade against 35 open-shop cloak and dress manufacturers" that represented the worst of the "hold outs." Vice-president Levy also informed the assembled members that their representatives would return to the city's Central Labor Council (CLC) for the first time in four years. President William Green had welcomed the ILGWU back into the American Federation of Labor a few days earlier, prompting the CLC's invitation to the Ladies' Garment Workers. The union's return to the CLC undermined manufacturers' charges that the ILGWU was an illegitimate, renegade organization outside of the

established labor movement.<sup>48</sup>

While Levy, Pesotta, and Wishnak prepared to fight, so did opposition groups determined to maintain "the last frontier of the open shop." The Southern Californians spent eighty-seven thousand dollars in support of a new anti-labor group called The Neutral Thousands (TNT). TNT leader Bessie Ochs, in collaboration with Harry Chandler at the Los Angeles Times, promoted the organization as a "women's front" united against union domination. The Southern Californians cut off TNT funding when they discovered that the organization's rolls had been copied out of the phonebook. Meanwhile, members of the Merchants and Manufacturers' Association drafted a pact assessing stiff future fines to any associated firm that recognized the ILGWU.<sup>49</sup>

In late July, five hundred cloak workers waged what proved to be the last major garment workers' strike of the year. Thousands of sympathy strikers filled the sidewalks, maintaining twenty-four hour picket lines around ten non-union shops. After a week of total work stoppage, the owners and members of the Los Angeles Contractors' Association accepted union terms, including reduced hours and pay increases. Levy optimistically asserted that "at last Los Angeles is a union town as far as the cloak industry is concerned."<sup>50</sup>

ILGWU bosses devoted the remainder of the year to organizing a huge Labor Day celebration, fighting internal

political battles, renewing expiring union contracts, and orchestrating several minor strikes. In September, Communist factions disrupted Joint Board meetings by creating "pandemonium" until "stopped by the loyal membership." Delegates then voted the Communist dominated committees controlling Pressers' Local 97 and Cloakmakers' Local 65 out of office. During the same period Pesotta led the effort to renegotiate terminated pacts with manufacturers and to renew contracts with the Altman Style Shop, Fashion Sportswear, Miracle Dress, David Pleating, and the Engel Company.<sup>51</sup> A successful strike against Film Modes, Incorporated provided the ILGWU with its final victory of 1940. The manager of the shop, Sid Simon, broke the firm's existing union contract by hiring non-union employees-- including several alleged members of the New York underworld. When Simon's thugs "encouraged" workers not to affiliate with the International, Pesotta organized picket lines that hastened acceptance of union conditions and brought the dismissal of Simon.<sup>52</sup>

In February of the new year, Levy's earlier positive assessment of the condition of the cloak trade proved incorrect. The Vice-president announced the necessity of a strike against twenty shops for failing to honor wage agreements. After two weeks of picketing, owners announced that they would comply with contract stipulations. To Levy and his colleagues, the episode made it clear that only constant vigilance would prevent deliberate "chiseling."

Contract jobbers at work in the cloak industry also withheld cooperation, until the union called employee meetings and made it clear that walkouts in their own establishments could be expected. With the return of union representation in the cloak trades came an additional success. The Vogel brothers agreed to dismantle their company union and made their coat factory a closed shop. After a three year struggle, the defiant trio had had enough.<sup>53</sup>

The situation in the dress industry at this juncture was still troubling. According to Levy, Wishnak and Pesotta suffered from a "lack of harmony" making it necessary to put Pesotta in charge of sportswear and give Wishnak responsibility for the dressmakers. The Pacific Coast Director hoped to put a stop to the exchange of accusations and the "blame shifting" going on between the two. Upon accepting his new assignment, Wishnak expressed pessimism about the entire situation and stated that "the possibility of organizing the dress industry is out of the question."<sup>54</sup> Wishnak wrote Dubinsky outlining his plans for a strike, stating that the outlook was "problematic." Few new workers had joined the union, and finances were inadequate. If non-union shops continued to function after a general walkout, Wishnak feared that his locals would dissolve.<sup>55</sup>

As the planned date approached, union officers made final strike arrangements in addition to coordinating other ILGWU activities. The national office recognized Los Angeles

Sportswear Local 384, consisting of employees of the mammoth Mode O'Day factory, and Dubinsky arrived in the city to visit the International's tuberculosis sanitarium in nearby Duarte, California. The union hosted a well-attended fashion show supporting organized Los Angeles garment producers and promoting the new "World's Sportswear Center."<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, Levy summoned San Francisco organizer Jenny Matyas, who rapidly assessed the situation and concurred with Wishnak's pessimistic predictions. Although aware of his subordinates' concerns, Levy insisted that "we must take our chances in calling the general strike," and requested an immediate ten thousand dollar check from New York.<sup>57</sup> Upon returning to the national office, the frugal Dubinsky wired only five thousand dollars to augment the strike fund and two thousand dollars to help set up the new sportswear local's headquarters.<sup>58</sup>

The general strike began on July 24 and lasted for five hot days. The Joint Board unanimously elected Pesotta secretary of the strike committee (an honor she attempted to refuse) and belatedly informed her that "all dress, blouse, skirt, sportswear, and lingerie workers" would be called out. Pesotta described her job as a "hot potato" and complained that she had specifically warned Levy that only the sportswear group was ready. Ready or not, thousands of women crowded the sidewalks to be confronted by the Red Squad, which transported dozens of workers-- including Pesotta-- to the Lincoln Heights Jail for violating picketing

ordinances.<sup>59</sup> Repeatedly, a policeman knocked Pesotta to the pavement and then arrested her for disturbing the peace. A local court gave her a suspended sentence for "striking an officer" and found her innocent of creating a public disturbance.<sup>60</sup> Anxiously, Dubinsky telegraphed the Los Angeles offices for news, and received notice that although most dressmakers were out the response from sportswear and other shops was only "fair."<sup>61</sup>

Mayor Fletcher Bowron selected a three-man committee to mediate negotiations that produced a settlement over the weekend. Most owners of shops that had formerly been under contract agreed to sign new three-year pacts that limited weekly hours and recognized the ILGWU as their employees' sole collective bargainer. The conference left two important union demands, those for pay increases and overtime pay, up for arbitration. Although the general strike was now officially over and a "historic triumph," according to Justice, scores of resisting shops remained under seige for weeks to come.<sup>62</sup>

Two weeks into the struggle Wishnak admitted to Dubinsky what articles in the labor press had been concealing: the campaign was in many ways a failure. Only six traditionally non-union dress shops had signed contracts, adding a paltry total of two hundred workers to the union's membership. Wishnak confessed that "it must be stated that we have not succeeded in crippling the shops to a very great extent" and

that the union "had only scratched the surface in the sportswear industry." Strike-related activities, which included radio broadcasts, the renting of a soundtruck, and the feeding of hundreds of pickets, resulted in a growing financial crisis.<sup>63</sup> Levy decided to tax the membership five percent of their pay to meet mounting costs, resulting in a quarrel among the leadership. Pesotta warned that the "income of such a tax may be ridiculously small," but damage to the morale of sportswear workers would be "irreparable."<sup>64</sup>

Dubinsky supported Levy's tax initiative, but at the same time complained of statistical discrepancies in the reports he was receiving. Levy claimed that two thousand sportswear workers had joined the union, while Wishnak set the figure at half that amount. Aspects of the "lack of harmony" that Levy had observed between Pesotta and Wishnak seem to have become general.<sup>65</sup>

Striking against sportswear firms continued into September and October, yielding several minor victories for the union before the season ended. Sol Sunken and Phil Rosenberg of the Sunrose firm hung out the white flag and signed a contract on behalf of one hundred employees, after resisting a month-long walkout by nearly all the shop's laborers. The Merchants' and Manufacturers' Association failed in an attempt to secure a court injunction against picketing, and strikers at Chic Lingerie withstood arrests and police harrassment.<sup>66</sup> While Levy turned his attention to



ILGWU business in Seattle and Portland, the Los Angeles locals hosted an "open house," celebrated Halloween, and contributed three hundred dollars to the United Service Organizations.<sup>67</sup>

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States's subsequent entry into World War Two disrupted plans for observing the yuletide holidays. "One of the most horrible cases of inhuman infamy, duplicity, treachery, and everything else beastly" temporarily superseded labor concerns.<sup>68</sup> Pesotta described the coming of war as the "end of an era"-- the end of labor's organizational drives under the New Deal.<sup>69</sup> If time had indeed run out for the unionization of the Los Angeles garment trades, one must conclude that the ILGWU failed to complete its mission. Wishnak estimated that sportswear factories alone employed ten thousand people, of which two thousand at best were union members. He predicted that the International would have to invest "at least \$100,000 in order to be successful."<sup>70</sup> When the new era arrived in the wake of Japanese torpedoes, it began with the open shop battered but still strong in the Los Angeles garment district.

Several internal factors contributed to the ultimate frustration of the ILGWU's agenda. Funding had never been sufficient to complete the job, if one accepts Wishnak's calculations and considers Dubinsky's thrifty allocation habits. Leadership seems to have posed a problem,

considering the total replacement of top administrators in 1939. If charges of corruption against Busick were justified, then the old leadership suffered from problems worse than mere ineptitude. The "lack of harmony" among new organizers and the disruption created by Communist union members may also be cited. Finally, the imposition of dues and taxes in the midst of a depression, however necessary, may have partially undermined recruitment campaigns.

External elements also created an adverse environment that exacerbated these problems. A hostile city government and police force conspired with the Merchants' and Manufacturers' Association, the Chamber of Commerce, the Southern Californians, and other labor-haters in resisting unionization. Public support that might have forced friendlier behavior on the part of government was deliberately dampened by a hostile city press-- led by the Los Angeles Times. The removal of NRA codes governing wage rates seems to have caused a lowering of wage scales in 1935. Finally, the constant opposition of employers played perhaps the greatest role in frustrating ILGWU plans. Even owners who signed contracts often broke their promises or resisted renewal agreements, forcing the union to retrace many of its steps. A sizable minority of cloak and dress manufacturers, and a majority of sportswear shops, never signed a labor pact throughout the period. Their stubborn defiance made liars of ILGWU organizers who promised to unionize entire industries.

In light of all the adversities that the International faced in the city of Los Angeles, one may marvel that the organization had the degree of success that it did. The gradual growth of the union in America's bastion of the open shop testifies to the determination of the membership and to the intransigence of a powerful management-government coalition.

## Notes

1 Pesotta to Dubinsky, 25 November 1933, Dubinsky Correspondence, Cornell University Labor Management Documentation Center, Ithaca New York. Hereafter cited (LMD).

2 Dubinsky to Pesotta, 11 December 1933, (LMD).

3 ILGWU General Executive Board Minutes, 3 March 1934.

4 Justice, 15 June 1934.

5 Louis B. Perry and Richard S. Perry, A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement 1911-1941 (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), 279.

6 ILGWU General Executive Board Minutes, 12 March 1934.

7 Perry and Perry, A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 279-80.

8 Justice, 1 November 1934.

9 Rose Pesotta, Bread Upon the Waters (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1944), 339.

10 Perry and Perry, A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 14.

11 La Opinión, 7 August 1936.

12 Ibid., 8 August 1936.

13 Pesotta, Bread Upon the Waters, 343.

14 La Opinión, 9 August 1936.

15 Perry and Perry, A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 415.

16 Illustrated Daily News, 21 November 1936.

17 Los Angeles Citizen, 22 January 1937.

18 Ibid., 23 January 1937.

19 Ibid., 29 January 1937.

20 Justice, 15 January 1938.

21 Los Angeles Citizen, 14 January 1938. Ironically Shaw was later forced from office by urban reformers who branded him the "lackey of big business." (Thomas J. Sitton, "The Recall of Frank L. Shaw," Ph.D. diss., University of California, June 1983, iv.)

22 Justice 15 July 1937.

23 Los Angeles Citizen, 18 June 1937.

24 Justice, 15 July 1937.

25 Decisions and Orders of the National Labor Relations Board Vol. 22, (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1941), 1066-75.

26 Justice, 1 August 1937.

27 Pesotta, Bread upon the Waters, 345.

28 Justice, 15 April 1938. The company agreed on a "preferential shop." Employees were free to refuse membership in the ILGWU, and the union could speak for only those that joined.

29 Ibid., 1 June 1938.

30 Ibid., 15 June 1938.

31 Ibid., 1 August 1938.

32 Ibid., 1 October 1938.

33 Perry and Perry, A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 511.

34 Los Angeles Citizen 23 June 1939.

35 Ibid., 7 July 1939.

36 Ibid., 11 August 1939.

37 Ibid., 8 September 1939.

38 Ibid., 10 November 1939.

39 Ibid., 11 August 1939.

40 Pesotta, Bread Upon the Waters, 336.

41 Perry and Perry, A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 515. Busick became a newspaper editor.

42 Justice, 1 January 1940.

43 Ibid., 15 January 1940.

44 Los Angeles Citizen, 19 January 1940.

45 Los Angeles Times, 20 January 1940.

46 Justice, 15 February 1940.

47 Los Angeles Citizen, 5 April 1940.

48 Ibid., 19 July 1940.

49 Justice, 1 June 1940.

50 Los Angeles Citizen, 2 August 1940.

51 Ibid., 12 September 1940.

52 Ibid., 13 December 1940.

53 Levy to Dubinsky, 7 March 1941, (LMD).

54 Levy to Dubinsky, 9 March 1941, (LMD).

55 Wishnak to Dubinsky, 8 July 1941, (LMD).

56 Justice, 1 June 1941.

57 Levy to Dubinsky, 15 July 1941, (LMD).

58 Dubinsky to Levy, 17 July 1941, (LMD).

59 Pesotta, Bread Upon the Waters, 380.

60 Los Angeles Citizen, 17 October 1941.

61 Levy to Dubinsky, 24 July 1941, (LMD).

62 Justice, 1 August 1941.

63 Wishnak to Dubinsky, 9 August 1941, (LMD).

64 Pesotta to Dubinsky, 5 August 1941, (LMD).

65 Dubinsky to Wishnak, 13 August 1941, (LMD).

- 66 Los Angeles Citizen, 10 October 1941.
- 67 Ibid., 31 October 1941.
- 68 Ibid., 12 December 1941.
- 69 Pesotta, Bread Upon the Waters, 400.
- 70 Wishnak to Dubinsky, 16 August 1941, (LMD).

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

More than any other factors, the determined opposition of hostile manufacturers and weaknesses in the ILGWU regional leadership produced the union's failure in Los Angeles. Significantly, both of these causes were local in nature. As the following discussion will demonstrate, conditions in Los Angeles were consistent with trends witnessed nationally regarding responses to federal legislation, business defiance of labor, and the activities of the left. Although the conflict between the AFL and the CIO involved the ILGWU as a whole, there is little evidence that the dispute had much effect upon Los Angeles garment workers' locals. The case of the Los Angeles ILGWU underscores the importance of regional environment that many histories tend to ignore. While New Deal legislation provided the impetus for labor activism, often unique conditions within each community determined the success or failure of unionization.

Stubborn manufacturers deserve much of the blame for the union's failure to effectively organize the Los Angeles garment district. Allied in the defense of maximum profits, they enjoyed the assistance of powerful allies. During the 1933 general strike and later labor disputes, shop owners paid at least a portion of the city police department to



harass union members. Manufacturers spent a fortune in paid advertising to discredit the ILGWU and anti-labor newspapers like the Los Angeles Times assisted them by printing anti-union stories and editorials. Individual companies like the one owned by the Vogel brothers went to extreme lengths to preserve the open shop, and many succeeded throughout the interwar period.

A weak and divided union leadership also undermined the building of an effective labor organization. Rose Pesotta and her associates initiated the 1933 general strike against Dubinsky's advice, straining the relationship between the New York and Los Angeles offices for the duration of the walk-out. Local leaders failed to report strike developments to the union president on a regular basis in both 1933 and 1941, resulting in his annoyance. Apparently the Los Angeles office initiated many projects, such as the publication of the Organizer, without Dubinsky's knowledge. This probably reinforced his legendary reluctance to disburse financial assistance. After the conclusion of the 1933 organizing campaign, inexperienced leaders took control of the battered Los Angeles locals, failing to build on the gains of the previous year.

Communists like Ivan Lutsky gained control of the city organization between 1934 and 1939, resulting in internal fighting that hurt the union and aided its enemies. Opponents of the leadership accused it of showing favoritism

toward party members, while the manufacturers used the issue of Communist influence to discredit the ILGWU. Regardless of the Communists' true intentions, their presence damaged the union effort, and membership levels failed to increase despite all of their efforts. It should also be mentioned that the alleged corruption involving Bill Busick occurred during the same period. Busick was not a Communist, but Lutsky was responsible for monitoring his behavior while managing the city union. By purging the Los Angeles leadership in 1939, Dubinsky acknowledged that the city organization had problems, but his new appointees had troubles of their own.

Louis Levy, the new leader of the Pacific region, had health problems that prevented him from vigorously fulfilling his responsibilities. George Wishnak and Rose Pesotta had a personality clash and disagreed over the union's prospects and its course of direction. Wishnak was cautious and pessimistic by nature, while Pesotta was impulsive and optimistic. The result was widely conflicting status reports that forced the New York office to guess at what the real situation in Los Angeles was. As union president, Dubinsky was in part responsible for all of these problems, but as the head of a national union he had many competing priorities.

Reactions in Los Angeles concerning federal legislation were fairly typical. The passage of the NIRA in 1933 resulted in numerous strikes and a surge in union

participation. Unfortunately, the California Labor Board created by the National Recovery Administration proved to be as inefficient as those elsewhere. When the Supreme Court overturned the Act in 1935, wages declined and some shop owners began ignoring their ILGWU contracts. Initially the passage of the National Labor Relations Act brought little change, because area manufacturers expected the Supreme Court to rule it unconstitutional. Despite these expectations, the Wagner Act survived judicial review and the reorganized NLRB in California proved to be more effective than its predecessor. The NLRB settled some disputes in the ILGWU's favor, while the old NRA board seemed more responsive to business interests.

The resistance tactics that clothing manufacturers used against the Ladies' Garment Workers resembled those implemented against labor groups across the country. Shopowners created merchants' associations that used blacklisting and discriminatory firing to discourage employees from joining the ILGWU. Company unions prevented authentic collective bargaining, and manufacturers waged expensive legal struggles to protect them. When workers walked out on strike, paid strikebreakers used violence to intimidate picketers. Managers hired scab replacements to ruin the effectiveness of stoppages, and threatened to stage lockouts-- although these never occurred. Some manufacturers moved their factories to the suburbs to escape the union,

paralleling the runaway shop phenomenon observed in the east. Perhaps shopowners never resorted to lethal force because most picketers were female, and the murder of women would have yielded bad publicity.

The activities of the Communists and Socialists in the Los Angeles ILGWU fit the national pattern. The Communist Needle Trades Union was active while the CP's dual union policy existed, only to be dismantled in conjunction with the Trade Union Unity League. Then Communists infiltrated the ILGWU only to face eventual expulsion. It is not remarkable that the Communists succeeded in gaining power within the garment workers' locals, because the radical politics of needle workers was traditional. The Socialist party failed to initiate any coordinated action, but at least one Socialist participated in local ILGWU activities. Rose Pesotta was a Socialist like the union president who employed her, and had had close ties to anarchist organizations during her adolescence in Russia. Like Dubinsky, Pesotta became an ardent supporter of FDR and the New Deal while never departing from her earlier convictions.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that several questions remain unanswered. With the materials that the writer amassed, the extent to which ethnicity affected union growth is unclear. A large percentage of Los Angeles Needle workers were Chicanos, but exact statistics are unavailable. The issue is complicated by the undocumented employment of

Mexican nationals and the existence of illegal shops run by subcontractors.

Likewise, the records of the Chamber of Commerce and the Los Angeles Police Department remain untapped. After receiving a request for access to its records, the Chamber of Commerce sent a printed brochure explaining that its mission is strictly to promote Los Angeles business. Apparently historical inquiry does not promote business. The Los Angeles Police Department denied a request for a list of strike related arrests and any other information that might be legally released.

A final question involves union records. Little Los Angeles documentation or correspondence appears to exist dating from the late 1930s-- the same time at which the expulsion of the Communist factions occurred. Perhaps there was a lapse in record keeping, but that seems unlikely. It is possible that someone decided to destroy materials that might prove a source of future embarrassment. Fortunately, surviving sources are sufficient to construct an adequate account of the period.

Despite the criticisms contained in this study the noble character of the ILGWU's efforts in Los Angeles should be recognized. The union battled in the interests of those who could not defend themselves, and most of its organizers worked tirelessly for minimal pay. Leaders like Pesotta risked personal harm and went to jail in support of striking

laborers. Considering the strength of the opposition, it is not certain whether any leadership could have engineered successes comparable to those won on the east coast. Although absolute victory remained beyond reach, the ILGWU represented a continual threat to the open shop. The viciousness of the manufacturers' counter-attacks showed a measure of respect for the capabilities of their union enemies. The limited advances made during the New Deal provided the basis for further union growth in the postwar era.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A  
LOS ANGELES ILGWU MEMBERSHIP STATISTICS



LOS ANGELES ILGWU MEMBERSHIP ROLLS- FALL, 1941

DRESSMAKERS

Local

84	.	.	.	.	124
96	.	.	.	.	933
97	.	.	.	.	<u>101</u>
Total					1158 (75% to 80% in good standing)

CLOAKMAKERS

Local

65	.	.	.	.	1666
84	.	.	.	.	154
97	.	.	.	.	<u>274</u>
Total					2094

SPORTSWEAR WORKERS

Local

384	.	.	.	.	500
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TOTAL ILGWU MEMBERS: . . . . . 3752

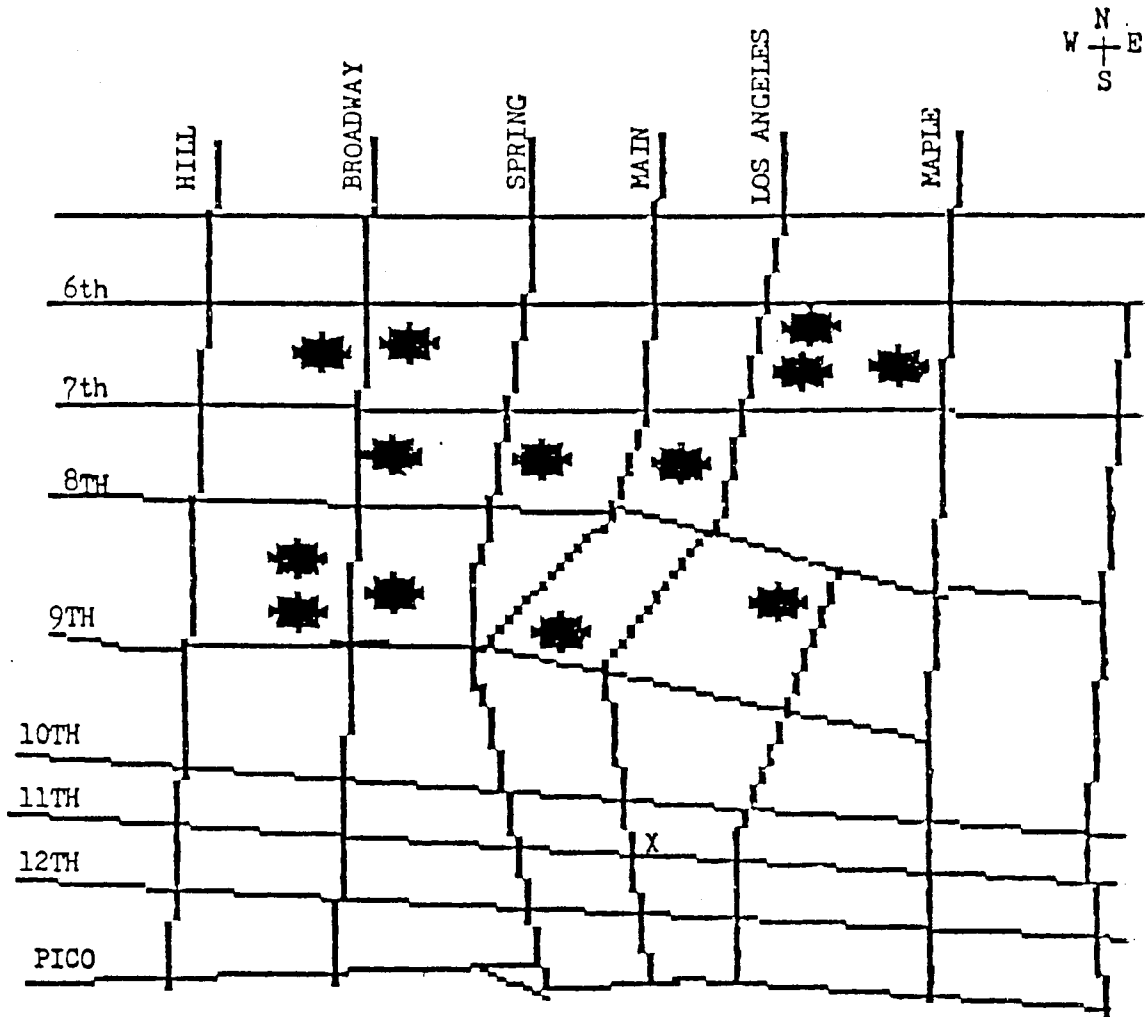
WOMEN'S GARMENT WORKERS IN L.A.: approx. 18000

(The union's latest census, taken in 1939, recorded a total of 15890 workers in 631 shops. \*Report of the General Executive Board, May 27- June 9, 1944.)

Information taken from the Los Angeles Joint Board Balance Sheet, September 1, 1941, and from Pesotta to Dubinsky, Dubinsky Correspondence, December 2, 1941 (Cornell Labor Management Documentation Center).

APPENDIX B

CENTRAL LOS ANGELES MAP FOR THE  
1933 DRESSMAKERS' STRIKE



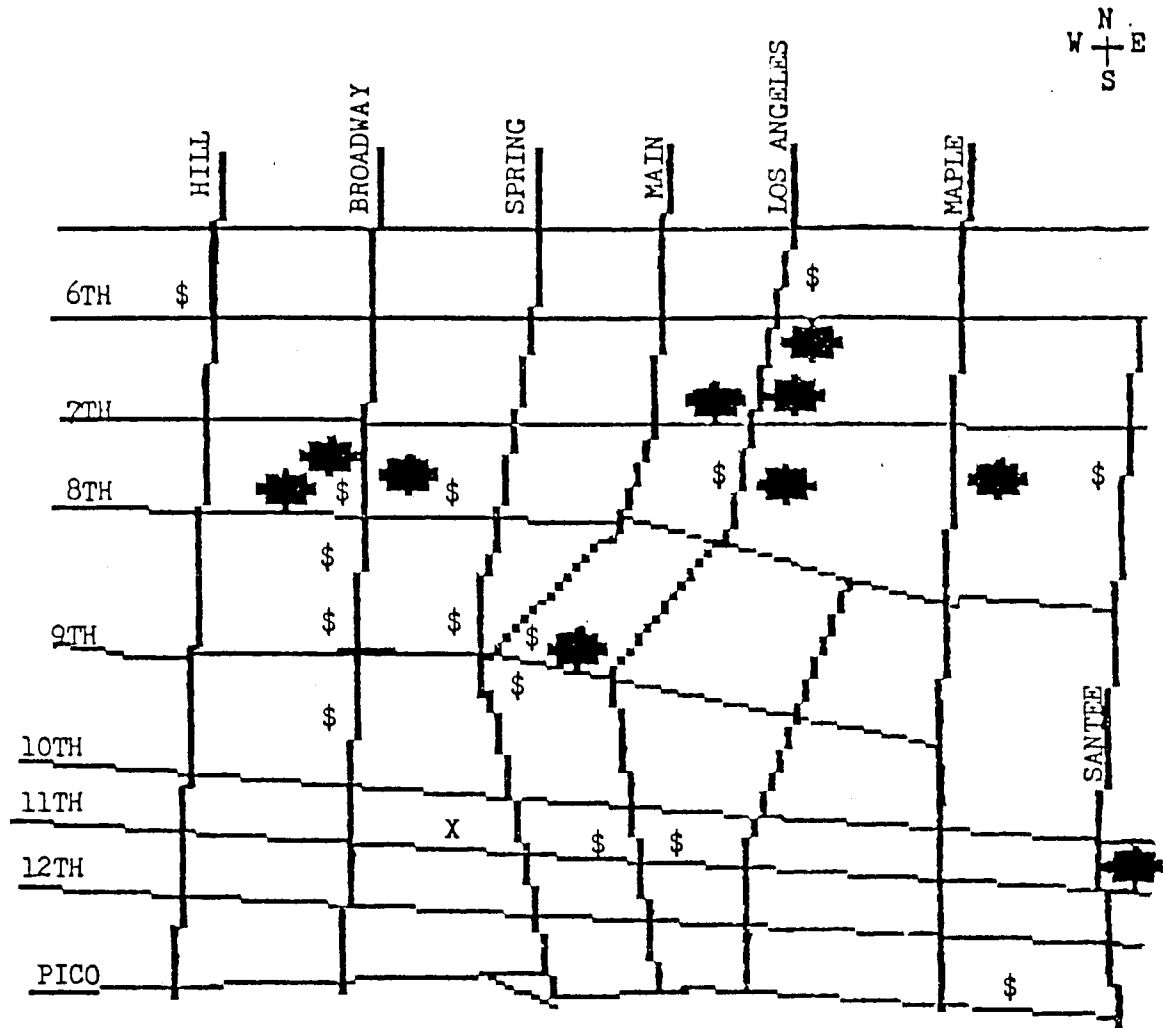
CENTRAL LOS ANGELES-- ILGWU GENERAL STRIKE, 1933

X ILGWU STRIKE HEADQUARTERS

★ DRESS SHOPS

\*This map depicts the sites of strike activity mentioned in the Los Angeles Times, the Los Angeles Citizen, and the Los Angeles Illustrated Daily News. According to the Citizen, Captain Hynes's police patrolled the area between 7th and 10th, beginning at Broadway and ending at Maple.

APPENDIX C  
CENTRAL LOS ANGELES MAP FOR THE  
1941 GENERAL STRIKE



CENTRAL LOS ANGELES-- ILGWU DRESS AND SPORTSWEAR STRIKES, AUGUST 1941

- X ILGWU SPORTSWEAR HEADQUARTERS
- \$ SHOPS CITED IN VIOLATION OF FEDERAL WAGE AND HOUR CODES (FAIR LABOR STANDARDS ACT)
- ★ PICKETED SPORTSWEAR AND DRESS SHOPS

\*Information gathered from the Los Angeles Citizen, the Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express, and Justice,

VITA

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